

THE LEADER WITH THE RED HANDS

(AN INDIAN TRADITION)

PART I

I

The sun has disappeared behind Jabwi, and its peak casts a shadow over the city of Kattak, pearl of the cities of Osira, which sits at the mountain's foot among forests of cinnamon and sycamore, like a dove resting on a nest of flowers.

II

The day that is ending struggles for a moment against the beginning of night, while the bluish mist of twilight spreads its diaphanous wings over the valleys, stealing the color and form from objects which seem uncertain, as though they were shaken by the breath of a powerful spirit.

III

The confusing noises of the city gradually disappear; the melancholy sighs of the night are repeated by the birds, and the thousands of mysterious noises, like a hymn to Divinity that begins with the dawn of Creation and ends with the disappearance of the star that enlivens it, all merge with the ripple of Jawkior whose waves are kissed by the evening breeze, making an indefinite, sweet, and uncertain song like the conclusion of the dance by a bayadère.

IV

Night finally wins out, and the sky is filled with stars that sparkle over the towers of Kattak as though it was wearing a crown of lights. Who is that Leader who appears at the base of the walls as the moon rises between the thin clouds over the mountains, whose feet are washed by the waters of the Ganges that meanders like an immense blue serpent with silver scales?

V

It is he. What other warrior out of all those who fly like an arrow to battle and to death under the banner of Shiva, what other warrior would adorn his hair with the red tail of the gods of India, hang the golden tortoise around his neck, and suspend his dagger with its haft of agate from his yellow shawl of cashmere, but Pulo-Delhi, Rajah of Dakka, victor in battle, who is the brother of Tippet-Delhi, magnificent King of Osira, Lord of Lords, Shadow of God, and Son of the shining stars?

VI

It is he. No one else would be able to fill his eyes with the bright glow of the morning star or the sinister gleam of a tiger's eye, giving his features the serene splendor of a cloudless night, or the threatening appearance of a tempest above the lofty summit of Davalaguri. It is Pulo. But what can he be waiting for?

VII

Can you hear the leaves rustle softly under the footsteps of a virgin? Can you see the border of her diaphanous shawl and the fringe of her white tunic floating in the shadows? Can you sense the fragrance that precedes her like the harbinger of an angel? If you wait, you will see her with the arrival of night. Wait, and you will recognize Siannah, who is the betrothed of the mighty Tippet-Delhi, but is his brother's beloved, the woman whom the poets of her nation compare to the smile which Brahma cast over the world at the moment of creation; a heavenly smile, the dawn of the universe.

VIII

Pulo hears the sound of her steps, his face shines like the mountain peaks kissed by the light of the sun, and he steps forward to greet her. Although his heart never trembles in the heat of battle nor in the presence of a tiger, it is now beating rapidly as her hand reaches out to him, and it seems like it will burst with the joy he can no longer contain. "Pulo!" "Siannah!" they exclaim, as they fall into each other's arms. Meanwhile, the Jawkior ripples under the wings of a gentle breeze, and its waters flow into the Ganges, the Ganges into the Gulf of Bengal, and the Gulf into the Indian Ocean. Everything passes; with the water, the hours; with the hours, happiness; and with happiness, life. All passes and merges with the heart of Shiva, whose mind is chaos, whose eyes are destruction, and whose essence is nothingness.

IX

The morning star announces the arrival of day; the moon vanishes like an illusion that dissolves, and dreams—the children of darkness—also vanish with it. The two lovers are standing under the shadow of a palm tree, a mute witness to their love and to their vows, when a loud noise erupts behind their backs.

Pulo turns his head and uttering a sharp cry like that of a jackal, he retreats ten paces in a single jump, with the sharp blade of a damascene steel dagger shining in his hand.

X

What has brought fear into the heart of this valiant Leader? Can those eyes shining in the darkness be those of a tiger, or a poisonous serpent? No. Pulo does not fear reptiles nor the king of the jungle. Those are the eyes of a man—his brother—from whom he has stolen his beloved, and by whom he was exiled from Osira; who, with his hand resting on the altar of his god, swore he would kill him if he returned to Kattak.

XI

Siannah also sees him and feels the blood freeze in her veins; she remains motionless, as if the hand of Death had seized her by the hair. For a moment, the two rivals examine each other from head to foot, and then with a savage cry, each one launches himself at the other like two leopards who are fighting over a prey... But let us draw a veil over the crimes of our forefathers; let us draw a veil over the scenes of grief and horror that were caused by the passions of those who are now in the bosom of the Almighty.

XII

The sun rises in the East. Seeing it, one might think the god of light, the conqueror of shadows full of pride and majesty, has passed by triumphantly in his chariot of diamonds, leaving behind, like the wake of a ship, the golden dust his horses raise as they travel across the heavens. The seas, the forests, the birds, the open spaces, the worlds, all have a single voice; and this voice sings a hymn to the day. Who does not feel his heart leap with joy in the presence of this solemn canticle?

XIII

Only one mortal; see him there. His wild eyes are looking with dismay at his hands that are stained with blood. Emerging from his lethargy and driven by a terrible frenzy, he tries in vain to wash them in the waters of the Jawkior. Under the water the blood disappears, but when he removes his hands from the river it reappears. Again and again he washes them in the water, but the stains keep on reappearing, until finally he exclaims with a tone of terrible desperation:

“Siannah! Siannah! A curse from Heaven has fallen upon our heads.”

Do you recognize that poor wretch at whose feet a dead body is lying, whose knees are embraced by a woman. It is none other than Pulo-Delhi, who is now the King of Osira, magnificent Lord of Lords, Shadow of God, and Son of the shining stars, following the death of his brother and predecessor...

PART II

I

“What good are power and riches, if there is a viper hidden in the depths of my heart, a viper that poisons it while I have no power to remove it? To be King and Lord of Lords; to see jewels and gold, pleasure and joy, pass before my eyes like the vision of a dream; to have them come within reach of my hand, to reach out and grasp them, and then to see everything I touch stained with blood!... Oh, that is unbearable!”

II

These are Pulo's thoughts, as he tosses and turns in his bed, as he wrings his hands in the midst of his terrible desperation. In vain the incense burners fill his opulent bedroom

with their delicate aroma; in vain his limbs rest on the silk sheets spread out over ten tiger skins; in vain for seven days the Brahmins have invoked the spirits of repose and the god of sweet dreams... Sitting on the head of his bed is Remorse, who drives them all away with a prolonged and mournful cry that constantly resounds in Pulo's ears and fills his heart with pain when he hears it.

III

Gods that travel in numerous caravans on dromedaries of sapphire between clouds of opal; *schivas* with green eyes like waves of the sea, with ebony hair and slender waists like reeds on the banks of a lake; songs of invisible spirits that refresh the weary brow of the just with their wings... none of this comes in a whirlwind of light and colors to the dreams of one who has recognized his guilt.

Gigantic cascades of blood, black and foamy, that pour rapidly over the rocks of a terrible precipice; fearful and confused images of desolation and terror... these are the scenes which invade his mind during his hours of repose.

IV

Because of this, the magnificent Lord of Osira is not able to taste the cup of henbane with which the gods soothe their chosen. Because of this, when light has barely dawned, he arises from bed, discards his elegant clothes that are shining with pearls and gold and, after a kiss on the brow of his beloved, he leaves the palace dressed as a simple hunter and travels to the section of the city which is overlooked by the peak of Jabwi.

V

From the side of this mountain a torrent of water pours out in sheets of silver until it reaches the plateau where its current slows, flowing silently between the pebbles and the flowers, until it arrives at the point where it merges with the clear waters of the Jawkior. A natural grotto, formed by enormous boulders that are grouped around it, serves as a basin for the birth of these waters. There, transparent and silent, the water seems to sleep without being disturbed by any sound other than the bubbling spring which is its source, the sighing of the breeze that comes to moisten its wings in the water, or the occasional screech of a condor as it plunges from the clouds like an arrow.

VI

Now outside of the city, Pulo orders those who accompany him to withdraw, and when he is alone, he begins to walk, sunken deep in thought, while making his way through rocks and crevices until he finally reaches the grotto where the current gushes out and sprinkles drops of moisture over his face. What is the intention of the Lord of Osira? Why did he discard his elegant tunic and yellow cashmere shawl to exchange his clothing for the simple garb of a hunter? Is he traveling to the forests to search for wild animals in their den? Is he going in search of solitude to serve as a balm for the troubles which other men could not comprehend?...

VII

No. Whenever the royal resident of Kattak leaves his fortress to pursue the fierce lion or the striped tiger, a hundred ivory trumpets echo through the forest, a hundred agile slaves precede him, clearing undergrowth from the paths and carpeting the places where his feet would walk; eight elephants carry his tent of gold linen, and twenty rajahs follow in his steps, while they argue over who should have the honor of carrying his opal quiver. Does he come in search of solitude? Impossible. Solitude is for those without guilt.

VIII

The sun has reached the middle of its journey, and Pulo has reached his destination. At his feet the torrent rushes by, and over his head is the grotto where the spring is located, a sacred spring which poured out of the rocks to quench the thirst of Vishnu when he was cast out of heaven and came to hunt on the slopes of Jabwi during the night. Ever since that distant time a Brahmin has always watched over this grotto, directing his prayers to the god, asking him to preserve the miraculous powers, which according to a venerable tradition, are present in its sacred waters.

IX

The last priest who, filled with devotion for the divinity, has come to spend his days in contemplation, is an old man whose origin is shrouded in mystery: no one knows when he first came to take refuge in the grotto of Vishnu. Venerable Rajahs, over whose heads more than forty thousand suns have shone, have said that in his youth the Brahmin of the torrent already had white hair, and his head was bowed. Whenever he comes down to the plains, people look at him with fear and respect. They say that serpents dance to his voice, that condors bring him his food, and that the spirit of those waters, to whom he owes his immortality, reveals to him the secrets of the future. Others maintain that he is none other than a god in the body of a Brahmin.

X

Who is he? Where is he from, and what is he doing? No one knows; but those who have the courage to ascend and visit the grotto where he dwells have asked him for such things as a cure for a terrible illness, for success with a risky enterprise, or for a penance which would atone for a crime that even blood could not erase. One of these is Pulo, because he is now approaching the grotto. Knowing that the simple atonements that the servile Brahmins of Kattak had imposed on him would not suffice to cure his remorse, he has come to consult the recluse of Jabwi, alone and incognito, so his royal identity would neither influence, nor seal the lips of the prophet.

XI

Making his way through the brambles that surround the torrent like a wreath, Pulo has arrived at the entrance to the grotto. There he sees a large copper basin suspended from

the branches of a tree for the traveler to assuage his thirst. The Leader knocks on it three times with the hilt of his saber, and the copper resounds with a mysterious, metallic clang that is lost in the murmur of the waters. A moment passes and the recluse appears.

“Chosen of the Great Spirit,” the Leader exclaims as he bows his head on seeing him, “may the anger of Shiva never gather over your head like fog on the mountain peaks.”

“Child of mortals,” the old man replied without responding to the salutation, “what do you want of me?”

XII

“To consult with you.”

“Speak.”

“I have committed a crime, a terrible crime that weighs on my soul like an endless nightmare. I have consulted the priests of Brahma in vain. The penances they gave me have been useless, and my heart is still filled with remorse. The ghost of the victim follows me everywhere. It has become like the shadow of my body, or the noise of my footsteps. You, who are in touch with all of the gods; you, who can read the future in the stars and in the sands of the sea, tell me: when will my soul be cleansed of this crime?”

“When the blood that stains your hands, which you are hiding from me in vain, has disappeared,” says the formidable Brahmin, casting a look of disapproval at Pulo, who is startled by the knowledge of the reclusive elder.

XIII

“Do you know me?” Pulo asks, when he has recovered from his surprise.

“I don’t know you, but I know who you are.”

“Who am I?”

“The murderer of Tippet-Delhi.”

At these words, the Prince drops his head as though he was hit by a bolt of lightning, and the Brahmin continues speaking:

“Last night, when sleep had descended over the eyes of mortals, I was still awake. A dull noise gradually rose from the depths of the sacred waters; it was a confusing noise like the buzzing of a hundred bees. A stream of cold and silent air blew out of the East; it rippled the waves and brushed my face with its moist wings. When I felt it, my nerves were jarred and I was chilled to the marrow of my bones. That wind was the breath of Vishnu. Shortly after that, I felt the weight of his right hand resting on my shoulder, as he informed me what you had done.”

XIV

“Well then, since you already know about my crime, tell me how I can atone for it and make these awful bloody stains disappear from my hands.”

The Brahmin did not reply, so Pulo continued: “Tell me! Is there no way I can remove this blood?”

“I do not know if your life is long enough to atone for a crime like this, and Shiva is angry since you have used your power to destroy, which only he is allowed to do.”

“Well then, if you do not know, we can ask Vishnu. He will protect me against his brother. Let us go into the grotto.”

“Have you fasted for three moons?”

“Yes.”

“Have you avoided the nuptial bed for seven nights?”

“Yes.”

“Have you refrained from hunting for nine days?”

“Yes, that too.”

“Then, follow me.”

A few moments after this short dialogue, they found themselves in the depths of the mysterious grotto.

XV

It is not known what happened then. The tradition has become somewhat imprecise and the Prince, through whom this is known, speaks only in a vague, uncertain fashion of monstrous winged serpents that dove into the waves of the torrent to emerge again in the form of fantastic, unknown animals; of incantations so frightening that at times the sun was hidden and the mountains trembled like reeds; of moans and howling so fearful that his blood congealed when heard them.

XVI

The words of the god have been preserved, and they are these: “Murderer, marked by Shiva with the seal of eternal infamy, there is only one penance with which you can atone for your crime: follow the shores of the Ganges and travel through the savage tribes that live on its banks until you find its source. In the distant country of Tibet that is protected by the giant wall of the Himalayas, you will come to the end of your journey. When you arrive, wash your hands in the remotest part of the spring at the exact hour when Tippot fell at your feet. During your pilgrimage, if you do not know your wife Siannah who should accompany you, the blood will disappear from your hands.”

So who is that pilgrim resting on his staff, who is accompanied only by a beautiful but humbly attired woman, who exits through one of the gates of Kattak at the same time as the moon disappears and the sun rises? It is he: Pulo-Delhi, magnificent King of Osira, Lord of Lords, Shadow of God, and Son of the shining stars.

PART III

I

The travelers are approaching the end of their journey. They have already left behind the fertile plains of Nepal, and they have seen Benares that is celebrated for its fortresses whose foundations are kissed by the sacred river that divides Hindustan from the empire of Burma. Like the creation of a heavenly vision, their eyes have gazed on Patna, famous for its temples, its women, and its tapestries; on Dhaka, the city that wove a veil for the

sanctuary of the gods with the ebony tresses of its virgins; on Gwalior, city of the maharajas of Sindhia, whose walls are so high that they touch the passing clouds.

II

They have also rested under the shade of the immense plane trees of Delhi, a shell that holds the pearl of kings and gives an offering of honey and flowers to the protective god of Allahabad, a city which owes its name to the caravans of pilgrims coming from all parts of India to worship in its temples, which are more numerous than the leaves of the forest or the sands of the Ocean.

III

Forty moons have risen since they left their fortress; but who could count the countries they have visited, the forests that have offered shade, or the rivers that have quenched their thirst? The Kiangar, known for its red waters; the Espuri, whose gentle current carries enough gold to construct a palace; the forests called Serwads where the boa slides through the sound of the rain; Lahore, the mother of warriors; Kashmir, the virgin with asbestos shawls, and hundreds of other countries, cities, forests, mountains, streams and rivers... until they reached the mountains of the Himalayas that look down over the immense plains of India.

IV

But they are now almost at the end of their journey; they have overcome the most terrible test of their endurance by following the Ganges through the valley of Acíbar, named for the juice it produces, as well as the bitter trials of those who must pass through it. There Pulo clammers over the rocky surface, carrying Siannah on his shoulders.

V

The rays of the sun are falling perpendicularly. The travelers who are weary after their arduous journey now rest on the banks of the river whose source they have almost reached. A corpulent baobab tree provides enough shade to cover a tribe of warriors. Through the mists in the distance it is still possible to see the Himalayas where, rising above the other peaks, Davalaguri looks down on half the world.

VI

A fresh breeze sways the magnolias and the tulips growing among the reeds along the banks, and it also dries the sweat on their brows. The bulbul perched on the branches of a tall palm tree sings a soft, melancholy song, and in the rays of diaphanous amber light reflected by the sands are myriads of birds and insects clothed in gold and blue, and with bands of emeralds.

VII

Everything offers repose. After refreshing themselves with some of the delicious fruits of the forest, Pulo and Siannah satisfy their thirst in the clear waters that kiss the banks with a gentle and melancholy sound like the cooing of a turtledove. With the pleasant sound of the water and with leaves waving like a fans of emeralds over their heads, they recall, with the satisfaction which one feels after surviving a dangerous ordeal, all the adventures they have experienced during their pilgrimage, the countries they have visited, and the magnificent panorama of marvels that have passed before their eyes. They talk about their plans for the future and the happiness that awaits them once they fulfill the vows, which are about to be satisfied. The words are spoken rapidly, full of fire and vivid colors. But eventually their dialogue begins to slow, as though they are speaking of one thing, while thinking of another. Finally, a few vague, disconnected phrases make way for Silence, who, with a finger placed over his lips, comes to sit down next to the lovers without being heard.

VIII

The sun falls straight down over the broad plains. The head of the Prince rests on the lap of his wife. Everything around them sleeps silently. In tropical countries mid-day is the night of Nature. The tranquility of this profound silence is only interrupted by the harsh cry of the bengalí, the buzzing swarms of insects that reflect the sunlight like a collection of precious stones, and the rapid breathing of Siannah, whose breath sounds as though she is experiencing the poignant emotions of a dream. The pilgrims are silent. What thoughts are passing through their minds.

IX

There are moments when the soul overflows like a cup of myrrh which can no longer contain the perfume, moments when objects seem to float and the imagination glides with them. Spirit loses its link to matter and slips away through the void to merge with waves of light that settle over the distant horizon.

The mind is neither on earth nor in heaven. It passes through a region without borders or foundations, an ocean of indefinable voluptuousness where it stretches its wings and rises to the region where love dwells.

Ideas wander in a confused fashion, like thoughts without form or colors that blossom in the mind of a poet, like those shadows—products of delirium—that call to us and then vanish as we try to embrace them.

X

Pulo is the first to break the silence.

“How sweet it is to hear the breath of the woman one loves, breath that escapes from passionate lips, pouring out of them like waves of ambrosia that come to expire on a beach of rubies! Oh beautiful Siannah, if only it were possible for me to explain to you what the murmur of your breathing says to me... In my ears it sounds like a rare voice

that whispers unknown words in a strange, heavenly language. It reminds me of those days of my infancy, those nameless and dreamlike hours when the little angels that were flying around my cradle used to tell me marvelous things that came to form the basis of my golden dreams. Is it not true, is it not true my beloved, that even the aroma which precedes the object of our love, even the tenuous and weak rustle of a tunic, has words which tell us something that others can never comprehend?"

XI

Siannah is silent; through her red lips that were partly open came passionate sighs, and a luminous drop of moisture shines in her eyes, like the reflection of a star in a lake.

"Pulo," she finally said, as though returning from a reverie that had separated her from earth for a moment, "is it true that there is a tree whose shadow causes death?"

"Yes, it is true," the Prince responded. "The god Shiva created it to destroy mortals, and his brother Vishnu, feeling sorry for our misfortune, spoke of it to Brahma who is his favorite."

Siannah sinks back into her silent agitation. Meanwhile, her husband studies her with an expression of indescribable tenderness.

XII

"Pulo," she exclaims moments later, "is it also true that there is a tree whose shadow stirs the blood in your veins so that passion is aroused?"

"Yes."

"Do you know it?"

"I have heard of it, but do not know its name. But... Why are you asking me this strange question?"

"I do not know... The shade of this tree hurts me... Let us continue our journey."

"Continue, when the sun is burning the sands? It would be better to wait until the afternoon breeze rises out of the gulf, and the light is less intense."

"All right, let us wait," Siannah murmurs; "but while we do that, look somewhere else, at the sky, or go to sleep, but do not keep staring at me like that."

XIII

"Yes, you are right. I am used to looking in your eyes with love, but our love which was chaste and pure, is now a crime. Yes, I must not look at you... Siannah, I am going to sleep. Sing to me one of the songs of our homeland, lull me to sleep like a mother, but no longer like a wife."

So the beautiful woman with ebony tresses begins to sing:

I

Warriors, the swords of our clan are thirsty, and the thirst of our swords can only be quenched by blood.

A torrent of fire descends from Jaburí. These sparks that are shining through the cloud of dust are raised by the hooves of our enemies.

Bring me the shield reinforced with seven buffalo hides, and drape my yellow shawl over my helmet so they will be sure to know me during the battle.

Warriors, the swords of our clan are thirsty, and the thirst of our swords can only be quenched by blood.

II

As they march forward, the comrades in...

But at this point, Pulo gets up, and Siannah stops singing.

“Why,” the Prince asked, “can I not hear the songs of my homeland with pleasure like I used to in the past? Is it that the heart of Delhi no longer beats in my breast, or perhaps, that songs of war were not made to be sung by a beautiful woman?”

XIV

“Sing me a song of love, like the one that virgins sing, like those that are accompanied by the sound of bells, when a young wife is led to the foot of the altar.”

“Pulo...”

“Sing, do not worry; I will sleep peacefully, lulled by the sound of your voice, the sigh of the breeze, and the music of the waters.”

So Siannah sings. Her voice trembles and her chest lifts regularly, like a rising wave that is crowned with foam.

THE RETURN FROM BATTLE

I

The battle has ended with the close of day, and the Leader has returned to the presence of this beloved.

The Virgin: “Leader, rest your head on my bosom, because I want to drink from it the sweat and the dust of victory.”

The Leader: “Virgin, press your lips on mine, because I want to drink of death from a cup of ruby.”

II

The Virgin: “Child of Creation! Son of Brahma! Spirit with seventy wings! Love, divine love! Descend in the arms of mystery and of night, and with your aura, crown those who burn in your flame.”

The Leader: Invisible Spirit! Breath of a Generous Soul! Hope of the Warrior! Love, burning Love! Leave the fortress of the gods for a moment and come to place a garland of roses over the crown of laurel on the Leader.

III

The Virgin: Your breath kindles and burns like the breath of a volcano. As your hand reaches for mine, it trembles like the leaf of a tree. The blood rushes through my heart; it spills over and inflames my cheeks. A veil of shadow falls over my eyelids. Everything is blurred and confused before my eyes that can only see the fire which is burning in yours. Leader, what invisible spirit is it that fills the air with sweet harmonies, and makes me tremble with its touch?

The Leader: It is Love that is passing by.

XV

Siannah's song ends, and with it, the soft and tender sound of a kiss is heard.

What are those proud castles men erect to protect themselves from the terrible weapons of Fate? They are mountains of sand like those on the plains of Nepal that amaze the traveler, and then a gust of wind blows them away.

PART IV

I

"My son," Shiva says to Sleep, "go down to Earth and be the messenger of my anger. On hearing these words, Sleep raises his head and opens his drowsy eyes; he lifts his many hands, each one of which is carrying a cup that is filled to the brim with a soporific liquor.

"What do you want of me, Father, who created me to serve as an invisible link between the finite and the infinite, between the world of men and that of souls, whose mission it is to lower the powers of Heaven and raise those of the Earth, so that they touch in the void which is the domain of my sovereignty?"

II

Shiva answers in the following way, as he speaks to his child:

"A short time ago I tried to bring about the destruction of the Prince who once wanted to usurp the power of death; but I tried in vain to find the means to strike him; in vain, because Vishnu, my arrogant brother, defended him with the protective shield under which he hides men from my eyes whenever they are filled with anger and emit rays that wound and kill. Then I heard a whirring sound and turned my head. A new world, a young planet, was moving toward me, tracing a circle in the heavens, as fascinating and innocent as a bird that is captivated by a boa...

III

...From inside it came a stream of harmonies that filled the sky and moved around it like the circles when a rock is dropped into a pond. Enveloped in a burning and luminous

fluid spreading through oceans of sound and color, its glory and happiness seemed like an insult to my terrible power. I lifted my hand and knocked it from its orbit, giving it a fatal blow. Sit up and turn your eyes to the immense vault of the heavens: there you will see Vishnu who is rushing after it, trying to pull it back from the immense tomb of stars and return it to life...

IV

This is the perfect moment for my vengeance. The Prince broke his vow, so now he is not protected by my terrible enemy. Cool his burning forehead with your wings and wait for the right moment to give him a dream that will be the precursor of death, a dream full of pain and anxiety like those that choke you with their merciless hands and weigh on the heart like a mountain of lead.”

V

Sleep spreads his nebulous wings and abandons the forest where he lives in a castle of ebony that is hidden among the shadows of the aloe trees.

Silence precedes him, and its creatures follow in fantastic groups that mix with one another, quickly giving rise to new forms, mad deliriums, and an assemblage of confused ideas like those that occur in the feverish imagination of an overexcited mind.

VI

This silent caravan arrives at the shores of the Ganges where the prince is resting. Soon he begins to experience a voluptuous lethargy, then a feeling of torpor, and finally his eyelids fall over his eyes like lead weights, or like tombstones over a grave. Sleep has poured on them a drop of the liquor from his mysterious opal vessel.

VII

When the body sleeps, the spirit awakens. While the Leader’s body remains immobile, sunken in a profound lethargy, his soul takes on an illusory form and, escaping from the bonds that imprison it, it launches itself into the ether. There, the creatures of Sleep are waiting for it, and they make it picture a world of beings animated by the imagination, a magnificent vision whose image is prophetic and real in its depth, illusory only in its form. Now, here is the Leader’s vision, as the tradition has preserved it.

VIII

The night is dark. The wind roars and whistles, shaking the gigantic branches of the baobab trees. The spirits brandish their red swords of fire, as they travel over the clouds. The thunder rumbles, echoing between the peaks of the mountain range. The wind whips the top of the palm trees and, mixing with the fearful howling of the storm and the frantic rustling of leaves in the forest, from time to time there is another distant, deafening roar that seems to emerge from the cavity of a bronze breast.

IX

If a Brahmin were to pass through the forest on a night like this, he would have no other recourse than to direct his prayers to the god of destruction, whose victory seems to be imminent, interpreting the violent sounds of Nature as a sign from the white ghosts of his ancestors who have emerged from their tombs to show him the path to death.

X

Of all the warriors who have worn the yellow shawl during festivals, or over their head in battle, only the Leader of Osira would have the courage to travel through the wild and tangled paths on a terrible night like this.

XI

Pulo advances with his bow raised, his arrow ready, and his knife between his teeth. Siannah is following him; her face is pale, her hair is on end, and her steps are hesitant.

“Do you hear that?” she asks the Prince; “do you hear that noise in the thickets?”

“It is only the wind in the palm trees,” the Leader responds but, in spite of himself, he directs a nervous glance through the trunks of the trees along the edge of the path.

XII

They both continue moving forward, as the storm becomes more and more violent. “Do you hear that noise growing stronger behind our backs?” Pulo’s beautiful companion asks, for the second time.

“It is the rain striking the lianas,” the Prince counters; but he draws his bow and nocks an arrow while he covers Siannah with his body.

“Do you hear that?” she insists once more; “Something is breathing near us.”

“Drop on the ground!” Pulo suddenly shouts. “A tiger is about to jump on us.”

XIII

Two phosphoric flames are glowing in the darkness. The Prince releases an arrow, and in response to its sharp whistle, comes a threatening roar. The tiger springs. Pulo drops the bow and raises his leather shield. He crouches and waits for the tiger with the knife in his hand. Siannah has fainted and is lying at his feet, covered by his battle cloak.

XIV

The battle is joined. Pulo sinks his knife over and over into the chest and the belly of the tiger which, in spite of its wounds, is still trying to launch itself on its adversary. Thanks to Pulo’s swift action and the skills he has perfected in battle, he is able protect himself with his shield and avoid the tiger’s attack. Finally, the fearsome beast utters its last deafening roar, and it falls to the ground with blood flowing from its many wounds.

The Prince directs his gaze up to the heavens, as though searching for the cause of this strange phenomenon.

XV

The rain has ceased, and the thunder is fading away. Following the brilliant flashes of the lightning, comes a glimpse of blue sky with a dim light, like the first sign of dawn before the sun has risen. After taking shelter from the storm under the green pavilions of the forest, the birds now resume their singing and begin to take flight. But suddenly, the songs die in their throats and they fall to the earth, fatally wounded by an invisible hand. The gigantic trees become agitated, and they twist as though suffering from a terrible convulsion; the ground becomes covered by the leaves that have fallen, like hairs shed from the head of a person who has aged. The green lianas hanging from the trunks that were rocked by the wind have lost their color and their freshness, and their flowers are wrinkled like a parchment that is left next to the fire. On seeing this astonishing spectacle, one might come to think that a deadly poison was flowing through the currents of air, or that vapors rising from the ground were poisoning the atmosphere, and with it the entire world.

XVI

Pulo, recovering from his stupor, begins to look around, and wherever he looks he sees nothing but desolation; but most astonishing, is the sight of the bloody corpse of the tiger, which begins to shake gradually losing its original form until through some inconceivable transformation, it takes the shape of a serpent.

“There is no longer any doubt,” he exclaims; “Shiva desires my death. I can see that this reptile is an agent of his anger. Oh! If only I were a god, so I could fight against the gods!... But nevertheless, miserable mortal that I am, I will not sell my life cheaply.”

XVII

The fearsome reptile grows with a prodigious rapidity. Its length is now thirty times greater than that of the earthly boa that is occasionally seen on the banks of the Sitapuri. Its large eyes, intense and captivating, are fixed on those of the Leader, who has a feeling of vertigo that fills him with a sense of desperation. He drops his shield, which would be useless in this battle, and he unsheathes his knife for the second time.

XVIII

With a sharp hiss, the gigantic serpent begins to coil. Without waiting for it to attack, Pulo wraps his arms around its neck, which is as thick as the trunk of a large palm tree, and he tries his best to wound it; but to no avail. The thick scales which cover it are as impenetrable as the shell of the giant tortoise of the Jawkior.

And now the reptile wraps the coils of its enormous body around him and begins to strangle him. Pulo's knife has slipped out of his hand, and he can sense the veil of death falling over his eyes when an arrow shoots out of the clouds and flies down to penetrate those of the serpent.

XIX

A terrible furor sweeps over the giant boa, and releasing the barely conscious body of the Prince, it begins to search blindly for its heavenly assailant. The diamond point of a second arrow quickly puts an end to its agony, bringing about its death.

Once he has recovered from his stupor, filled with a profound sense of gratitude and respect, Pulo is able to see the one to whom he owes his life.

Vishnu stands next to him with a leather cloak draped over his shoulders, his bow still drawn, and a quiver of diamond-pointed arrows on his back. The head of the god touches the clouds, and his shadow is as large as that cast by the Himalayas over the plains when the sun drops behind the edge of the Ocean.

XX

“Pulo,” exclaims the enemy of Shiva with an angry tone, “why did you climb to the sacred grotto of the Jabwi? Why did you bother to consult the waters of its source if the heavenly revelations were useless, if you were going to break your vow like one breaks an arrow over his knee as a gesture of peace between two enemies?”

Pulo is silent; the flush of his guilt stains his bronze cheeks and chokes his voice. So Vishnu continues speaking:

“As great as the weakness of men, is the kindness of Heaven, and that is why I have taken pity on your guilt. It is now useless for you to try to reach the source of the Ganges. Each grain of sand that falls as a measure of your guilt must now be added to that of your retribution. The penance that was imposed on you by the recluse of Jabwi is now insufficient to cleanse your soul.”

XXI

“If a single moment of forgetfulness was enough to destroy all that I had accomplished with my efforts to indicate my repentance, what can I do now to wash away my guilt?” the Prince insists.

“Rise up,” the god responds; “take your bow, remove your sandals, and abandon the banks of Ganges; travel back the way you have come until you reach Kattak. Lost among the sands of the coast is a forgotten temple, a temple that your glorious forefather erected in my honor during the times when his invincible armies were protected by my shield. Above the rugged crags that tower over the foaming waves is the nest of a crow. Climb to the nest and ask the crow to tell you where the temple is hidden. You will recognize the latter by the fires which sparkle over its ruins during the night, and you will know the former by his white head.”

XXII

Vishnu disappears. The trees recover their luxuriance, the moon its whiteness, and the birds their voice. The livid color of the sky is replaced by the tranquil splendor of the stars, and by a night that is filled with harmony, perfumes and songs.

The Prince rises and hurries to the place where Siannah's unconscious body remains hidden under the folds of her husband's cloak. Pulo lifts the cloak, and a cry of surprise and anxiety escapes from his lips; Siannah is no longer there.

.....

XXIII

At that point Sleep spreads his wings and departs from the Prince. The latter, still pale and shaken, awakens from his nightmare and looks around for his wife in whose arms he was sleeping. But she is nowhere to be seen.

The sun, resting in its bed of purple and gold, like a rajah on his carpet of colors, casts its last rays on the Earth through its partly opened eyes. Nature begins to awaken from its dream of midday. The evening breeze, filled with murmurs and perfumes, caresses the chalice of the flowers that open with its kiss. The clear waters of the Ganges that mirror the green vegetation on its banks raise a melancholy hymn, to which the birds add their soft notes, bidding goodbye to the day with a sad farewell.

XXIV

“Siannah,” the Leader calls with a voice that is choked with tears, “Siannah, dear one, why do you not answer? Siannah, constant companion of my sorrow and my adversity, who stole you away and deprived me of the only happiness I still had? Oh! Please come back; please come back, dear one; without you my life will only be a night without dawn, a lament without tears.”

XXV

Only the echo responds and Pulo, captured by a mad frenzy, rushes to the banks of the Ganges desperately trying to find some trace of her footprints in the sand. He calls her name over and over again... but all is in vain. As night slowly erases the colors of day, the clouds and the stars, silent observers of the lover's joys and sorrows, begin to appear one after the other. But Siannah does not appear.

XXVI

“Fool,” exclaims an invisible voice that echoes in the wind, with no sign of where it comes from, “what are you trying to do?”

The Leader, who has unsheathed his knife and is about to plunge it into his breast, stops in surprise as the voice continues:

“If you die, you will never see her again; if you continue living and do what I told you, the bloodstains will disappear from your hands, and you will find your wife again.”

Our dreams have the essence of reality, with forms that are unreal: the gods descend to mortals in them, and their visions are pages from the future, or memories of the past.

The voice which detained Pulo is that of Vishnu, who had appeared to him during his dream.

PART V

I

After a journey which lasted almost a year, the Prince finally arrived at the place which was described by the god. During this entire time Vishnu had kept his eyes fixed on his protégé, watching over him day and night, until he arrived at the coast near Kattak.

II

Dawn opens the veil of night and from its golden tresses comes a shower of pearls with the drops of dew that cover the hills and the plains; the horizon of the sea turns red, and the crest of the waves shines like the scales of the armor on a warrior preparing for battle; emanating from the flowers still damp from the tears of twilight, a stream of aromas and perfumes passes through the clouds and mixes with prayers of the Brahmins, until they reach the feet of Brahma, divine creator of all the worlds.

III

Pulo is seated on one of the rocks that are found in that part of Osira, next to the wide beaches of the Ocean. His thoughts are divided between his missing wife, and his own conscience.

“The time of pardon is now approaching,” he says; “only a few more efforts, and I will find myself in the presence of the mysterious bird that Vishnu has chosen to be the bearer of his wishes. God who preserves all that exists by keeping storms and death away from the fortunes of men, do not impose your will between me and the arrow of the warrior, the claws of the tiger, or the rings of the gigantic boa; but instead protect me from myself, and take away the memory of a love whose blows are killing me without being able to see the hand that wounds me.”

IV

The sun slowly rises from the bosom of the sea and climbs toward the highest peak of the firmament. After washing his hands and his bloody feet seven times and after reciting several fervent prayers, Pulo begins the difficult ascent toward the highest part of the rocks, whose summit has been blackened by lightning and whose feet are washed by the waves of the Ocean.

V

After climbing for almost an hour, holding onto the bushes and the thickets that grow in the narrow openings between the rocks, the Prince finally reaches the highest point of the promontory.

Between the rocks that crown its summit there is a crevasse, and at the bottom he can distinguish the indistinct form of a bird, whose strange, glowing eyes are shining directly into his own.

VI

“Bird of the gods,” Pulo bursts out, falling to his knees before the nest of the crow with the white head; “mysterious bird, under whose black plumage Vishnu lived for the space of three centuries and in this way was able to escape death at the hand of the god of destruction: I am here, awaiting your words like tulips parched by the rays of the sun wait for the drops of dew at night.”

VII

Leaving his lair, the crow settles on one of the highest rocks and, after flapping his wings three times, he begins to speak to Pulo, who listens in silence with his forehead bowed toward the ground:

“Lord of Osira, mighty descendant of the Delhi clan, conquerors of India and disciples of Vishnu: I know what you come to ask of me, so you need not tell me. The temple you seek is far away from our present location. Follow me, and I will show you where to begin the excavations.”

VIII

The white-headed crow rises into the air and then drops to the foot of the promontory where he waits for the Leader to descend. When the latter has finished his descent, the mysterious bird begins to move forward making small jumps, always following the shore of the ocean, where the waves are breaking with their golden crest.

They continue throughout the entire day, never leaving the shore which is whitened by foam. But when the sun finally descends into the bosom of the waves surrounded by the red rays which break through the clouds, the winged guide turns away from the shore and begins to move inland, passing through a boggy region where dense clusters of tall green reeds are growing.

IX

The clouds are rapidly gathering in the West, enclosing the dying sun in a shroud of fog before it descends into its grave.

The night advances, a dark night with no stars or transparency; the breeze murmurs the prayer of the dead, sighing sorrowfully among the reeds; the perfume from flowers that are opening in the shadows wafts through the air. The cry of the jackal and the screech of nocturnal birds merges with other sinister and mysterious sounds which come forth to tremble and expand through the bosom of night, without any indication of what might be producing them.

“Immortal bird,” Pulo exclaims, stopping in his tracks, “look how the night has taken possession of the earth so that it is impossible for me to follow you, because the darkness has robbed my vision.

The cry of the jackal is coming closer and closer; you know that I am not afraid, but I have no weapons, and I will be unable to defend myself against its treacherous attacks. Let us turn back and wait for day to continue our journey. It would be reckless for one to

risk his life against enemies he could neither kill nor conquer. If at least the moon were shining in the sky, its light would guide me through this swamp where, with each step I take, I fear death will drown me in these muddy and stagnant waters.”

X

“You need not fear,” the crow answered; “the god who sends us will protect us from on high. But before we continue, I will explain some things about our journey: the plains we are about to cross are the place where your father was defeated. Shiva was jealous of the devotion rendered to your protector in the temple to which we are traveling, and in his anger he aroused the warriors of Kattak and Lahore, who were burning with a thirst for vengeance against your father. They then gathered together in the darkness of night to sharpen the swords with which they planned to strike the favorites of Vishnu.

XI

...One day your father left the temple and was traveling through the forest which surrounds the hill on which it is hidden. Suddenly, a huge cloud of dust that blocked the sun rose out of the East and caught his attention. “What a large group of pilgrims must be coming to the temple of my god,” he said, turning to one of the traitorous rajahs who was carrying his shield and his quiver...

XII

...The latter, with a knowing glance toward his companions, replied to the victorious king with a smirk on his lips: “Who knows what far away country could be sending this enormous group of pilgrims? The fame of the temple of Kattak has spread from mouth to mouth to the remote regions of the world.” But after your father looked once more at the cloud of dust that was approaching, he saw that it was filled with sparks of fire, and he shouted with alarm:

XIII

“What is this? The rough cloaks of these pilgrims reflect the rays of the sun like the armor of soldiers from Lahore. Do you hear that? That noise we are hearing is the fierce sound of trumpets of war. Yes, there is no longer any doubt: the enemy that I trampled under my feet has now risen up like a snake to bite them. No matter; we will find out if the leaders of Lahore have finally learned how to fight, after running away for so many years...”

“Comrades,” he said to those who accompanied him, “give me my bow and my shield. Draw your swords and let our war horns call my brave warriors to battle.” It was then that Eldi Salek, one of the traitorous captains, stabbed him with his own sword which he had been carrying. Then, brandishing it in the air in triumph, the traitor shouted: “Take courage, my companions in slavery! Take courage, warriors of Kattak and Lahore who were subdued by the power of a tyrant! Take courage, our country is now free!...”

XV

While he says this, the unfortunate king is wallowing in his own blood; he tries in vain to rise and call for help, but his voice chokes in his throat. He makes a final attempt to stand, but then collapses and dies, with his clenched fists still reaching for the murderous armies that have come to attack him...

XVI

...In the temple, the priests of Vishnu have seen the attack, and they climb to the highest towers of the pagoda where they fill the air with blasts from the sacred horn that are answered on the plains by the bronze trumpets of your father's warriors...

XVII

"Where is our Leader? Why is he not charging like a lion into battle? Why can we not see his purple cloak, or the yellow shawl that covers his head? Master, where are you?," shout the brave warriors who have conquered Kattak. But no one knows the whereabouts of the Lord of Osira, nor why he does not respond to the sound of battle...

XVIII

...The enemies advance, the plains groan under the weight of their wagons and their elephants, and the distant mountains echo their savage cries. The fierce sound of battle, and of death, is heard. The defenders of Vishnu succumb one by one to cruelty of steel, and soon the temple of the god is wrapped in flames, as is the new city which the Lord of Osira had begun to build around it, in honor of the god of Allahabad...

XIX

...When night arrives, the dying flames of the conflagration cast flickering shadows over the plains, sparkling on the helms of the valiant warriors who have succumbed to the blows of Shiva, and who are lying in the dirt covered with blood and glory.

A deep silence reigns over what had been the bloody theater of battle, a silence that is interrupted only by the crash of the burning walls as they collapse and by the harsh cry of the jackal who has been blinded by the fire and now howls in his cave, afraid to pounce on the unburied bodies...

When day dawns the conquerors abandon the scene of battle, and since that time, no one has dared to set foot on it, fearing the anger of Shiva who wants this place to remain a ruined temple that is inhabited only by fear.

.....

XX

Overwhelmed by a feeling of religious dread, Pulo listens to the story of the bloody battle where his father lost his life, a story that is enacted by the dancers of his country,

but with a plain simplicity that has never brought a burning tear to his eyes like the one which now scalds his cheek.

XXI

The crow continues speaking...

“Look, and there among the thick reeds you will see the thin, red flame that spreads over the surface of the malodorous water of the swamp. Farther away, at the foot of the hill in the shadows of a forest where a crude tomb is formed of irregular stones, you can see how that flame expands and floats over the grave, halting next to tree trunks where it multiplies, subdividing into a thousand other flames with a bluish splendor...

XXII

...Those are the spirits of the brave men who, in defense of the god who protects you, succumbed to the blows from the axe of Kattak. Bend your knee to the ground, because your father is about to leave the shelter of his tomb and guide us through the swamp and the ghosts of the heroes to the place where, covered with moss and hidden among the reeds, we will find the only remains of the altar of Vishnu.

.....

XXIII

Pulo kneels, and from the crude tomb in the forest a reddish flame rises up and begins to move in the direction of the sunset.

The crow follows the flame, and Pulo follows the crow. Suddenly, the crow stops on top of a hill where the wind rustles the leaves of the trees. The bird with a white head takes flight and circles above the ruins of the pagoda; he calls to the Leader and the latter, who was wandering and lost in thought, begins to climb up the hillside that leads to the end of his pilgrimage.

PART VI

I

“Return to your kingdom, gather your resources, and bring with you the best artisans you can find. In the light from the sun during the day and in torch-light during the night, labor without a moment of rest or idleness, filling the remote corners of this location with the happy and lively sound made by workers that is accompanied by the powerful blows from the hammer...

II

...You have a period of six years to rebuild the pagoda so it becomes something all the world will admire; clouds will gather around these lofty towers and storms will thunder over them as they often do on mountain peaks. There are silks in Kashmir; gold in Siam;

cedars in Kuwait; elephants in Lahore; and pearls in the gulf of Hormuz. Travel through these countries, and once you have added to it all these acquisitions, the new pagoda will shine like the stars that fill the heavenly home of the gods.”

“And how should Vishnu be represented,” the Prince asks: “in the garb of a hunter, as a symbol of his attributes, or in the same form as yours, since that was how he appeared for several centuries?”

The crow continues:

“Once you have placed the final stone on the highest tower on the Eastern side which looks down over the waves, a gigantic tree trunk from an unknown tree will be carried to these shores by the waves. By the end of the day when you find it, a pilgrim will arrive at the doors to your palace. Receive him into your presence, wash his feet, and provide him a place at your table...”

III

...This pilgrim will tell you to ask him for something in exchange for your hospitality. You must ask him, in the name of our mutual Protector, to carve the latter’s image on the trunk of the unknown tree. If he agrees to your request, supply him with all the tools that he needs and assign him an isolated room in your palace. But take care not to spy on him during his work, not with even a single indiscreet glance. Because if you were to do that, it would cause the stranger to disappear from your presence, and then all the efforts you have made to ease your conscience and wash the blood from your hands would come to naught.

IV

“Your words,” Pulo answered, “will be engraved in my memory like the final words of my dying mother, or like the first declaration of my love for Siannah. But before you leave, perhaps forever; before you take flight and return to your solitary rock on the cliff above the sea, tell me if you can, if it is possible or if the secret of your existence can be revealed to a miserable mortal: who are you? What divine spirit lives within you? Why, when you have the wisdom, not of a man but of a god, do you remain in the form of a bird? Can it be that the power which sustains you lacks the ability to give you whatever form you desire?”

V

The bird with the white head answers him in the following way:

“I was what I am, a crow. It was about six or eight thousand years ago; while Vishnu was being pursued by his dire enemy, Shiva, he fled from star to star throughout the heavens. After traveling through the entire immensity of space, he finally took refuge on the Earth. Even there his adversary pursued him; Shiva was about to discover his trail when, in his determination to survive, Vishnu saw me in the top of an aloe tree and he used his essence to give life to my form so that he could incarnate himself in it. In this way he was able to escape the vigilance of his enemy...”

VI

...Three centuries passed; then, after returning me to my original state, the god asked: "What would you like?" "Immortality." "And is there anything else?" "Great wisdom." "And is that all?" "And to be a man." "From this moment, your wishes will be granted." And I became an immortal and infallible man; I lived in the world, I reformed society, I wrote laws and..., the satisfaction I felt with my efforts, my desires and my love was so complete that I asked to go back to being a crow. Thinking that I was dead, men have paid tribute to me. But here I am as a crow, and I will be a crow until the end of time.

VII

"But who are you, or who were you?" Pulo asked the bird who is beating his jet-black wings as he starts to fly away.

"Read the inscription that I carved with my beak on the decaying stone of the altar and you will know," says the crow without slowing his flight.

Pulo hurries to the location that was just indicated; indeed, on the moss-covered stone he reads the following inscription:

"This is the altar of the temple of Jagannath. By the inspiration of Vishnu, Brahma left the rock where he lived far from the noise of the world, so that he could show himself to Pulo-Delhi, King of Osira, Lord of Lords, Shadow of God, and Son of the shining stars."

PART VII

I

Two years have passed.

The temple of Jagannath, or *Lord of the Universe*, has risen again over its ancient foundations. On the same day that the final stone was placed on the giant tower of the pagoda, the sea carried the trunk of a tree to the sands of the beach, and after covering it with a purple mantle, the Brahmins brought it to the dwelling of the Leader.

The latter, sitting on a Persian cushion is now impatiently waiting for the hour when the sun will descend from its golden chariot to hide itself behind the bright band of light that covers the horizon of the Ocean.

II

The mists of twilight rise over the silent countryside and the father of day hides behind the clouds that are building up in the West when Pulo, who has his eyes fixed on the path that leads to his palace which is still empty, exclaims with a tone of profound distress:

"The day is ending and night is arriving, but the pilgrim does not come. Can it be that I have offended the god again with my impatience? My impatience! Yes! When the reappearance of my wife depends on his arrival, when the end of my suffering and the pardon for my guilt depends on the completion of his work... how could I not be anxious for the sunset and the arrival of night, and with it, that of the divine messenger?"

III

“Here I am.”

Startled on hearing those words, the Prince turns to look at the one who said them full of joy and anxiety.

The pilgrim, for indeed it is he, touches Pulo lightly on the shoulder and then, as Vishnu said he would, he begins to speak to the Prince, mentioning all the things that had been in his mind, in the following way:

“Night is advancing; it is written in the sacred *Vedas* that the world is the home of the pious pilgrim. In the humble hut, or in marvelous palaces, there must be a place for him at the hearth, at the table, and in a bed. Lord of Osira, do you offer me a place of shelter in your home?”

IV

Pulo responds:

“A new husband who trembles with anticipation, would not lead his wife to the nuptial bed with more pleasure than I now feel when I offer you a place in my home, in one of my beds, and at my table.”

V

Welcomed by the impatient Lord of Osira, the pilgrim enters the palace. Torches have been lit, the fire is kindled, and Brahmins serve exquisite food in golden vessels on two magnificent Kashmir shawls, to Pulo and to the guest sent by Heaven. When the banquet has concluded, amber glasses filled with aromatic liquors brimming with happiness and intoxication are passed around. The pilgrim then turns to Pulo, who is feeling the effects of the wine and the excitement of the occasion.

VI

“Lord of Lords,” he says, “your cup has been mine. How can I reward you for the hospitality you have offered me? Speak; your wish will be fulfilled.”

Following the instructions of Brahma, Pulo asks him to carve the image of Vishnu into the trunk which the waves have brought. The pilgrim agrees, and he is given the instruments he will need, as well as the solitary room he asks for.

VII

The pale queen of darkness rises slowly into the night sky, pouring out a soft, melancholy splendor that breaks into sparks of silver on the crest of the waves.

All is submerged in the most profound silence when Pulo, startled by a dream that has disturbed his spirit, wakes up and rubs a hand over his forehead to wipe away the fog of intoxication.

VIII

He recalls all that happened that day in his palace and, driven by a strong feeling of curiosity and impatience, he listens to see if, in the silence of the night, he might hear the sound of the hammer and the chisel of the sculptor.

But not even a slightest murmur disturbs the tranquility of the shadows.

IX

And Pulo thinks to himself: "What if he has been so intoxicated by the wine and liquor that he has fallen asleep and has stopped working?"

Then a battle is waged in his soul between his curiosity and his fear, a struggle that ends with the victory of the former.

The god of evil guides his steps through the night and, driven by an irresistible force, they lead him toward the isolated room of the pilgrim.

X

Pulo stops to listen once more, but there is nothing but silence. What can he be doing? If only it were possible to resolve this mystery!

Unable to control his curiosity any longer, the Leader with the red hands draws apart the silk curtains that cover the door to the traveler's room. A lightning bolt striking at his feet could not have been more shocking than the scene which now greets his eyes.

XI

The pilgrim is gone. In the center of the room, in the dim light of an alabaster lamp, he sees the ill-defined bust of a hideous idol.

The unreal creations of madness, the worst possible nightmare, or the insomnia of an overwhelming delirium, could not have created an image that was more appalling.

XII

This is not the noble face of the beneficent god who has protected Pulo, the face whose features have lines of kindness and strength; nor does it have the wild and manly beauty of the god of the forest. No, the features of this crude, unfinished sculpture have an appearance which is both infernal and fearsome; the fierce eyes seem as though they are about to emit a ray of death and the mouth is twisted in a savage smile. Everything in the appearance of this sculpture represents the god of evil.

It is the face of Shiva, not that of Vishnu.

Pulo's impatience has destroyed forever the possibility of his redemption.

XIII

The latter is dismayed, but when he recovers control of himself, he exclaims in a loud voice: “Brahmins, wake up from your dreams; the meager hope I had for happiness has vanished like the fragrant aroma of a lily that is blown away by the wind. Shiva has won the battle. Come and pick up the idol that represents him. Carry it to the altar singing hymns of mourning. The temple of his brother will now be given to Shiva, and along with it, my life.

XIV

The Brahmins and servants of the Prince who have come in answer to his call hurry to carry out his command. Torches are ignited and send out brilliant streams of light, warriors pound their shields with the pommel of their swords, and harsh blasts from their horns awaken the inhabitants of Kattak. The sad and somber procession carrying the god of death and destruction travels toward the enormous pagoda. From within it is heard the sound of fearful cries and horrible laughter. It is the gods of destruction who celebrate their victory.

XV

Day has begun to dawn; the moon fades away, and the sea is brightened with the first light of day. The temple shimmers, illuminated from within by hundreds of magnificent lamps of bronze and gold. The white smoke that rises from the altars spreads an aroma of myrrh and aloe throughout the pagoda. Dressed in elegant garments and wrapped in the yellow shawl which is the symbol of his sovereign power, the Prince is kneeling before the altar.

The ceremony, in which the Brahmins ask for the mercy of the gods and then dedicate the temple of Jagannath to the god of death, has now ended.

XVI

“Priests, citizens, slaves!” the Lord of Osira cries out, “the anger of the gods hangs over my head like a sword that dangles from a thread. Since I have risen to the throne no one has seen my hands... and that is because they are stained with blood! See them now; this is the blood of my predecessor, the blood of my brother, whose crown I took when I took his life. Shiva, the god of remorse and atonement, now demands an eye for an eye, a life for a life. Let his will be fulfilled! Priests, citizens, slaves: pray for the last of the Delhi, whose lineage will now disappear from the Earth.

Overwhelmed and filled with fear, the multitude is silent. Pulo turns toward the altar on which the bust of the god has been placed and directs his words to the idol, whose lips seem to twist in a silent and hideous smile.

XVII

“Shiva, enemy and destroyer of my family, if blood can erase my guilt and remove your anger from Siannah, take it now as my final offering. But let me see her once more before I leave this world, so that her mouth may receive the last, cold breath from mine; so that her kisses may close my eyes to the eternal night of the tomb.

XVIII

The crowd of those who occupy the naves of the temple have their eyes fixed on the Prince, and they now give out a cry of horror.

Pulo has run himself through with his sword, and a warm gush of blood spills over the face of the god.

In that instant a woman dashes across the atrium of the pagoda and rushes toward the raised platform which holds the altar of Shiva.

“Siannah,” murmurs the Prince, when he recognizes her; “Siannah, I finally see you... before I die.” And then he expires.

XIX

Siannah, the pearl of Hormuz, the violet of Osira, the symbol of beauty and love that Brahma created in a moment of joy by combining the gracefulness of the palms of Nepal, the suppleness of the reeds of the Ganges, the emerald of the eyes of a *schiva*, the light of a diamond of Golconda, the harmony of a summer night and the essence of a wild lily of the Himalayas; Siannah, a beauty among beauties, followed Pulo on his journey through the unknown regions from which no one returns.

Siannah was the first widow of India to throw herself on the fire along with the body of her husband.