

HAITA, THE SHEPHERD.

BY AMBROSE BIERCE.

In the heart of Haïta the illusions of learning and experience had not supplanted those of youth. His thoughts were pure and pleasant, for his life was simple and his soul devoid of ambition. He rose with the sun, and went forth to pray at the shrine of Hastur, the god of shepherds, who heard and was pleased. After performance of this pious rite, Haïta unbarr'd the gate of the fold, and with a cheerful mind drove his flock afield, eating his morning meal of curds and oat-cake as he went, occasionally pausing to add a few berries, cold with dew, or to drink of the waters that came away from the hills to join the stream in the middle of the valley and be borne along with it, he knew not whither. During the long summer day, as his sheep cropped the good grass which the gods had made to grow for them, or lay with their fore-legs doubled under their breasts and indolently chewed the cud, Haïta, reclining in the shadow of a tree or sitting upon a rock, played so sweet music upon his reed pipe that sometimes from the corner of his eye he got glimpses of the minor sylvan deities leaning forward out of the copse to hear; but if he looked at them directly they vanished. From this he must be thinking if he would not turn into one of his own sheep—he drew the solemn inference that happiness may come if not sought, but if looked for will never be seen; for next to the favor of Hastur, who never disclosed himself, Haïta most valued the friendly interest of his neighbors, the shy immortals of the wood and stream. At nightfall he drove his flock back to the fold, saw that the gate was secure, and retired to his cave for refreshment and for dreams.

So passed his life, one day like another, save when the storms uttered the wrath of an offended god. Then Haïta covered in his cave, his face hidden in his hands, and prayed that he alone might be punished for his sins and the world saved from destruction. Sometimes when there was a great rain, and the stream came out of its banks, compelling him to urge his terrified flock to the uplands, he interceded for the people in the great cities which he had seen laid in the plain, and the two blue hills which formed the gateway of his valley.

"It is kind of thee, O Hastur," so he prayed, "to give me mountains so near to my dwelling and my fold, that I and my sheep can escape the angry torrents; but the rest of the world thou must thyself deliver in some way that I know not of, or I will no longer worship thee."

And Hastur, knowing that Haïta was a youth who kept his word, spared the cities and turned the waters into the sea.

So he had lived since he could remember. He could not rightly conceive any other mode of existence. The holy hermit who lived at the head of the valley, a full hour's journey away, from whom he had the tale of the great cities where dwelt people—poor souls—who had no sheep, gave him no knowledge of that early time when, so he reasoned, he must have been small and helpless like a lamb.

It was through thinking on these mysteries and marvels and on that horrible change to silence and death which he felt sure must sometime come to him as he had seen it come to so many of his flock—as it came to all living things except the birds—that Haïta first became conscious how miserable was his lot.

"It is necessary," he said, "that I know whence and how I came; for how can one perform his duties unless able to judge what they are by the way in which he was entrusted with them? And what contentment can I have when I know not how long it is to last? Perhaps before another sun I may be changed, and then what will become of the sheep? What, indeed, will have become of me?"

Pondering these things, Haïta became melancholy and morose. He no longer spoke cheerfully to his flock, nor ran with alacrity to the shrine of Hastur. In every breeze he heard whispers of malign deities whose existence he now first observed. Every cloud

was a portent signifying disaster, and the darkness was full of new terrors. His reed pipe when applied to his lips gave out no melody but a dismal wail; the sylvan and riparian intelligences no longer thronged the thicket-side to listen, but fled from the sound, as he knew by the stirred leaves and bent flowers. He relaxed his vigilance and many of his sheep strayed away into the hills and were lost. Those that remained became lean and ill for lack of good pasture, for he would not seek it for them, but conducted them day after day to the same spot through mere abstraction while puzzling about life and death—of immortality he knew nothing.

One day, while indulging in the gloomiest reflections, he suddenly sprang from the rock upon which he sat, and with a determined gesture of the right hand exclaimed: "I will no longer be a suppliant for knowledge which the gods withhold. Let them look to it that they do me no wrong. I will do my duty as best I can, and if I err, upon their own heads be it!"

Suddenly, as he spoke, a great brightness fell about him, causing him to look upward, thinking the sun had burst through a rift in the clouds; but there were no clouds. Hardly more than an arm's length away stood a beautiful maiden. So beautiful she was that the flowers about her feet folded their petals in despair and bent their heads in token of submission; so sweet her look that the humming birds thronged her eyes, thrusting their thirsty bills almost into them, and the wild bees were about her lips. And such was her radiance that the shadows of all objects fell divergent, turning as she moved.

Haïta was entranced. Rising, he knelt at her feet in adoration and she laid her hand upon his head.

"Come," she said in a voice which had the music of all the bells of his flock—"come, thou art not to worship me, who am no goddess, but if thou art truthful and dutiful I will abide with thee."

Haïta seized her hand and, stammering his joy and gratitude, arose, and hand in hand they stood and gazed in the maiden's eyes. He gazed upon her with reverence and rapture. He said:—"I pray thee, lovely maid, tell me thy name and whence thou comest."

At this she laid a warning finger on her lip and began to withdraw. Her beauty underwent a visible alteration that made him shudder, he knew not why, for still she was beautiful. The landscape was darkened by a giant shadow sweeping across the valley with the speed of a vulture. In the obscurity the maiden's figure grew dim and indistinct and her voice seemed to come from a distance as she said in a tone of sorrowful reproach:—"Presumptuous and ungrateful man! must I then so soon leave thee? Would nothing do but thou must at once break the Eternal Compact?"

Inexpressibly grieved, Haïta fell upon his knees and implored her to remain—rose and sought her in the deepening darkness—ran in circles, calling to her aloud; but all in vain. She was no longer visible, but out of the gloom he heard her voice saying:—"Nay, thou shalt not have me by seeking. Go to thy duty, faithless shepherd, or we never meet again."

Night had fallen, the wolves were howling in the hills and the terrified sheep crowding about his feet. In the demands of the hour he forgot his disappointment, drove his flock to the fold, and repairing to the place of worship, poured out his heart in gratitude to Hastur, then retired to his cave and slept.

When Haïta woke the sun was high and shone in at his cave, illuminating it with a great glory. And there, beside him, sat the maiden! She smiled upon him with a smile that seemed the visible music of his pipe of reeds. He dared not speak, fearing to offend her as before, for he knew not what he would venture to say.

"Because," she said, "thou didst thy duty by the flock, and didst not forget to thank Hastur for staying the wolves of the night, I am come to thee again. Wilt thou have me for a companion?"

"Who would not have thee forever?" replied

Haïta, "O! never again leave me until—until I—change and become silent and motionless."

Haïta had no word for death.

"I wish, indeed," he continued, "that thou wert of my own sex, that we might wrestle and run races and so never tire of being together."

At these words the maiden arose and passed out of the cave, and Haïta, springing from his couch of fragrant boughs to overtake and detain her, observed to his astonishment that the rain was falling and the stream in the middle of the valley had come out of its banks. The sheep were bleating in terror, for the rising waters had invaded their fold, and there was danger for the unknown cities of the distant plain.

It was many days before Haïta saw the maiden again. One day he was returning from the head of the valley, where he had gone with ewe's milk and oat-cake and berries for the holy hermit, who was too old and feeble to provide himself with food.

"Poor old man!" he said aloud as he trudged along homeward. "I will return to-morrow and bear him on my back to my own dwelling, where I can care for him. Doubtless it is for that that Hastur has reared me all these years and gives me health and strength."

As he spoke, the maiden, clad all in glittering garments, met him in the path with a smile which took away his breath.

"I am come again," she said, "to dwell with thee if thou wilt now have me, for none else will. Thou mayest have learned wisdom and art willing to take me as I am, nor care to know."

Haïta threw himself at her feet. "Beautiful being," he cried, "if thou wilt but deign to accept all the devotion of my heart and soul—after Hastur be served—it is yours forever. But alas! thou art capricious and wayward. Before to-morrow's sun I may lose thee again. Prout! I beseech thee, that however in my ignorance I may offend, thou wilt forgive and remain always with me."

Scarcely had he finished speaking when a troop of wolves sprang out of the hills and came racing toward him with fiery eyes and dreadful howls. The maiden again vanished and he turned and fled for his life. Nor did he stop until he was in the humble dwelling of the holy hermit, whence he had set out. Hastily barring the door against the wolves, he cast himself upon the ground and wept.

"My son," said the hermit, from his couch of straw freshly gathered that morning by Haïta's hands, "it is not like thee to weep for wolves—tell me what sorrow has befallen thee, that age may minister to the hurts of youth with such balm as it hath of its wisdom."

Haïta told him all, how thrice he had met the radiant maid and thrice she had left him forlorn. He related minutely all that had passed between them, omitting no word of what had been said.

When he had ended, the holy hermit was a moment silent, then said: "My son, I have attended to thy story and I know the maiden. I have myself seen her, as have many. Know, then, that her name, which she would not even permit thee to inquire, is Happiness. Thou saidst well to her that she was capricious, for she imposes conditions that man cannot fulfil, and delinquency is punished by desertion. She cometh only when unsought, and will not be questioned. One manifestation of curiosity, one sign of doubt, one expression of misgiving, and she is away! How long didst thou have her at any time before she fled?"

"But a single instant," answered Haïta, blushing with shame at the confession. "Each time I drove her away in one moment."

"Unfortunate youth!" said the holy hermit, "but for thine indiscretion thou mightest have had her for two.