

*The following story was included in a collection of stories and poems, published under the title, THE ENCHANTED FOREST. The story was based on an Indian folk tale entitled "The People Who Hugged Trees". The story was re-told, highlighting the character of Amrita, the young maiden who tried to save the forest..*

*This version is therefore entitled AMRITA because the character of Amrita has been newly created and brought to life.*

## Amrita

**A** girl child was not a blessing.

Raesa had made offerings to Shasti, the Hindu Goddess of Children. She prayed to Shasti to protect her when she was in labour and to guard over her child until he reached puberty. A boy child. She had no doubt that Shasti would send her a boy child. He would help his father and grow to be a fine man.

She carefully prepared the offerings; white cheese, fresh from the milk of their goat. She put the whey aside for the cat, for Shasti was always pictured riding a cat. She plucked the ripest pomegranates from the tree behind their hut. She peeled them and arranged the swollen, purple berries around the cheese. They were poor people, but the Gods would reward their devotion.

The birth was difficult. Raesa lay moaning all day while the midwife bathed her arms and legs, and wiped her forehead with a cool, damp cloth. When the child finally arrived, it was a girl child.

Raesa clutched the little infant to her breast. Her mother's love banished all thoughts of a boy child. She was grateful for the new life that nestled in her arms.

It was only after a few days had passed that Raesa began to sense that something was not right. The little girl whom she had named Amrita, lay, as babies do, not focussing on the shapes and forms before her. Her eyes seemed to gaze into the

distance. It was only when Raesa passed her hand in front of her little girl's face, and received no response, that she began to dread the cruel truth.

Amrita was blind.

The distraught parents took her to the Holy Man of the village for counselling. His verdict was that they had offended the Gods and this was their punishment. Raesa and her husband were bewildered. What had they done to offend the Gods? They were god-fearing folk and lived simply and devoutly.

They took her to the old Herbalist who lived alone under the Banyan tree. The original support trunk of the tree had died so that the banyan had become a 'columnar tree' with a hollow central core in which the old man sought refuge at night.

"Our child was born unsighted", whispered Raesa. "Please help us restore to her the gift of sight, so that she may behold the wonders of the world."

The old herbalist who was almost blind himself, passed his bony hands over the child's face. His lips barely moved as he softly intoned an incantation. He touched her forehead with some reddish paste creating a 'third eye'.

"This child is a gift from the Gods," he said softly. His voice sounded like the rustling of dry leaves. "She does not require physical sight. She has inner sight. You have been blessed. Take good care of her."

From that day Amrita became a special child, not only to her parents, but to all the villagers. She was God's gift to them all.

Her other-worldliness increased as she grew into a young girl. Because she had no sight, her sense of hearing and touch were magnified. She learned to recognise the villagers by their tread, and greeted them before they spoke to her. She had recorded in her mind's eye, the features of the narrow streets that wound between the little houses and was able to move from one to the other without hesitation. Her sensitivity caused her to glide, seemingly without touching the earth. Only the tinkle of the little bells her mother had attached to her ankles heralded her coming.

Her greatest joy was to spend her hours wandering in the forest that bordered their village.

The village lay on the edge of a great desert. The red dunes of the desert undulated in the haze of the heat and stretched onwards to infinity.

Miraculously, over the years, a forest had taken root at the edge of this desert. An oasis provided life-giving sustenance to seeds, scattered by the desert wind, which grew with time into a dense forest. The village was born between these two extremes.

Amrita knew every tree in this vast forest. She greeted them like friends and fingered their bark with affection. She had her own name for each of them. Some days she would sit beneath the huge wild Plum tree, whom she addressed as *Grandfather Plum*, telling him of life in the village.

“You wouldn’t like it there,” she said. “It’s noisy and loud. The Baker blames his wife when the bread doesn’t rise. The Shoemaker beats his leather to soften it and beats his children to teach them a lesson. Nobody is satisfied. Everybody complains. Here, the birds are at peace with the trees. The leaves are at peace with the branches. All is peaceful. All is quiet. All are content.”

\*

One hot day, while life was continuing as usual in the village, an emissary from the Maharajah arrived on horseback, seeking the Head of the village. His billowing white robes and silver beard declared him to be an important personage. He was ushered into the house of the village elder by a curious knot of villagers who witnessed his arrival. The door closed behind him while the onlookers waited in a state of great excitement.

“What is the reason for his visit? Perhaps they are at war? Why has the Maharajah chosen our village? It has to be something of great import!”

After what seemed an interminable period of time, the emissary emerged from the house, mounted his horse and galloped off.

Shortly thereafter it was announced that all the villagers were summoned to a meeting in the village square at sunset. The Maharajah’s emissary had brought news of a horrifying event.

The village was abuzz. “What can the horrifying event be? It must mean war!”

\*

The Head Man of the village had been elected for his wisdom and his perspicacity. Although he was considered to be one of the “elders” of the village, he was relatively young. Life had not bowed him like the other elders. He stood erect and alert.

Every soul who belonged to the village community attended, including Amrita and her parents.

Al Barsan, for that was his name, stood silently until the jostling townsfolk grew silent. His face was troubled.

“We are faced today with a grave crises,” he began. “As you know, an emissary of the Maharajah called on me today. He brought word that the Maharajah is planning to build a great new fortress. It will be the greatest in the land, able to repel all invaders from the desert regions.”

He paused.

“Why is that so terrible?” called one of the villagers. “Surely that is a good thing. We should be ready in case of attack.”

Al Barsan held up his hand.

“In order to build his fortress he plans to chop down all the trees of our forest. He has commanded his axemen to cut down every tree they find, to build his mighty fortress.”

There was a moment of stunned silence.

“Our forest! What will become of us? Surely we can dissuade him! Why not build the fortress of stone?”

Al Barsan shook his head.

“In two days time he will send 100 axe-men to carry out his command.”

There was pandemonium. Everybody was speaking at once. Some wept. Some cursed. Others hurled defiance.

In the midst of this uproar a slight figure made her way through the crowd. The uproar abated as they parted at her coming.

“It is Amrita! Let her speak to the Maharajah. He will heed the word of God who speaks through her. She will save our forest.”

A wave of hope swept through the crowd as Amrita stood beside Al Barsan. She spoke softly, but her voice was heard by all.

“Would you allow someone to end the life of your children, your parents, your friends? The forest is the home of our trees, and our trees are our friends. They shield us against the desert wind. They provide shade for us with their branches. But more than that they are the heart of our village. Without the forest there is no village. Without the trees we have no friends. Why should the Maharajah send his axemen to slay our friends? And by slaying them, slay us?”

A well of indignation filled the hearts of the villagers. Amrita continued calmly: “What can we do to save our friends? We can show the Maharajah how dearly we love them. We can show the Maharajah that we are prepared to give up our own lives to save our friends. When he witnesses our love and our devotion to our forest, to our friends, he will surely desist. He will surely relent and call off his axe-men.”

\*

As the sun rose on the fateful day, one hundred axe-men marched into the village, followed by the Maharajah and his retinue. They found the village empty. Not a soul was to be found.

“They have fled! No matter. Begin your task,” commanded the Maharajah.

What the axe-men saw when they approached the forest threw them into confusion. Beside every tree was a villager grasping the tree in a tight embrace.

“What should we do?” cried the axe-men.

“Chop them down!” ordered the Maharajah.

At that moment a great wind sprang up from the desert. Some of the houses in the village were swept away. The wind was so fierce that the Maharajah and his axe-men had to seek shelter in the forest. There they were safe while the storm raged about them.

When the storm abated the villagers felt sure the Maharajah would relent.

“Thank you, Grandfather Plum,” whispered Amitra embracing the mighty tree. “Surely, the Maharajah will spare our forest now.”

\*

The sun set that day on a bloody sight.

Amitra and three hundred villagers lay hacked to death beside the fallen trees they had embraced.

*Wordcount: 1 735 words.*