

The Legend of Gwâshbrâri, the Glacier-Hearted Queen

Flora Annie Steel

Indian

*Intermediate
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Once upon a time, ever so long ago, when this old world was young, and everything was very different from what it is nowadays, the mighty Westarwân was King of all the mountains. High above all other hills he reared his lofty head, so lofty, that when the summer clouds closed in upon his broad shoulders he was alone under the blue sky. And thus, being so far above the world, and so lonely in his dignity, he became proud, and even when the mists cleared away, leaving the fair new world stretched smiling at his feet, he never turned his eyes upon it, but gazed day and night upon the sun and stars.

Now Harâmukh, and Nangâ Parbat, and all the other hills that stood in a vast circle round great Westarwân, as courtiers waiting on their king, grew vexed because he treated them as nought; and when the summer cloud that soared above their heads hung on his shoulders like a royal robe, they would say bitter, wrathful words of spite and envy.

Only the beautiful Gwâshbrâri, cold and glistening amid her glaciers, would keep silence. Self-satisfied, serene, her beauty was enough for her; others might rise farther through the mists, but there was none so fair as she in all the land.

Yet once, when the cloud-veil wrapped Westarwân from sight, and the wrath rose loud and fierce, she flashed

a contemptuous smile upon the rest, bidding them hold their peace.

‘What need to wrangle?’ she said, in calm superiority; great Westarwân is proud; but though the stars seem to crown his head, his feet are of the earth, earthy. He is made of the same stuff as we are; there is more of it, that is all.’

‘The more reason to resent his pride!’ retorted the grumblers. ‘Who made him a King over us?’

Gwâshbrâri smiled an evil smile. ‘O fools! poor fools and blind! giving him a majesty he has not in my sight. I tell you mighty Westarwân, for all his star-crowned loftiness, is no King to me. Tis I who am his Queen!’

Then the mighty hills laughed aloud, for Gwâshbrâri was the lowliest of them all.

‘Wait and see!’ answered the cold passionless voice. ‘Before to-morrow’s sunrise great Westarwân shall be my slave!’

Once more the mighty hills echoed with scornful laughter, yet the icy-hearted beauty took no heed. Lovely, serene, she smiled on all through the long summer’s day; only once or twice from her snowy sides would rise a white puff of smoke, showing where some avalanche had swept the sure-footed ibex to destruction.

But with the setting sun a rosy radiance fell over the whole world. Then Gwâshbrâri’s pale face flushed into life, her chill beauty glowed into passion. Trans-* figured, glorified, she shone on the fast-darkening horizon like a star.

And mighty Westarwân, noting the rosy radiance in the east, turned his proud eyes towards it; and, lo! the perfection of her beauty smote upon his senses with a sharp, wistful wonder that such loveliness could be—that such worthiness could exist in the world which he despised. The setting sun sank lower, reflecting a ruddier glow on Gwâshbrâri’s face; it seemed as if she blushed beneath the great King’s gaze. A mighty longing filled his soul, bursting from his lips in one passionate cry—‘O Gwâshbrâri! kiss me, or I die!’

The sound echoed through the valleys, while the startled peaks stood round expectant.

Beneath her borrowed blush Gwâshbrâri smiled triumphant, as she answered back, 'How can that be, great King, and I so lowly? Even if I *would*, how could I reach your star-crowned head?—I who on tip-toe cannot touch your cloud-robed shoulder?'

Yet again the passionate cry rang out—'I love you! kiss me, or I die!'

Then the glacier-hearted beauty whispered soft and low, the sweet music of her voice weaving a magical spell round the great Westarwân—'You love me? Know you not that those who love must stoop? Bend your proud head to my lips, and seek the kiss I cannot choose but give!'

Slowly, surely, as one under a charm, the monarch of the mountains stooped-nearer and nearer to her radiant beauty, forgetful of all else in earth or sky.

The sun set. The rosy blush faded from Gwâshbrâri's fair false face, leaving it cold as ice, pitiless as death. The stars began to gleam in the pale heavens, but the King lay at Gwâshbrâri's feet, discrowned for ever!

And that is why great Westarwân stretches his long length across the valley of Kashmîr, resting his once lofty head upon the glacier heart of Queen Gwâshbrâri.

And every night the star crown hangs in the heavens as of yore.

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