

Ila's Double Life

Ila, the king of Bahlika, was famous for his valour and for his love of hunting. One spring season, he went to the vast forest on the mountain with his attendants and killed hundreds and thousands of animals, all in one expedition, but his desire for the hunt did not abate. As he pressed deeper and deeper into the forest, he found himself at the spot where Shiva was sporting with Parvati. To please his consort, Shiva had assumed the form of a woman; therefore, everything in that forest had become female; so much so that even the trees that had masculine names had become feminine. So, when King Ila arrived there, he discovered that he had become a woman, as had every member of his entourage.

Mortified, he approached the great god and implored him to show mercy.

'Aside from manhood, ask for anything, and I'll grant it,' Shiva told him.

But gaining his masculine form back was the only thing the king wanted. So he turned to Parvati and begged her for a boon.

'The giver of one half of the boons is Shiva; I am the giver of the other half. Since he has made you woman, I can only turn one half of you male. Will you accept that?'

Ila thought for a moment and then asked the goddess: 'Is it possible that instead of a half male and half female form, I alternate between male and female from one month to the next. This way, for one month I'll be a woman and the next I'll be a man?'

'Granted,' Parvati said. 'The month that you are female, you'll not remember your manhood at all, and becoming a man, you'll have no memory of being a woman.'

And so, the year round, Ila alternated between being a handsome man and a beautiful woman.

In the first month as a lovely woman, Ila wandered the forest with her attendants, who had also become women. One day, coming upon a still lake, she sat down by the water and began splashing in it, washing her limbs with abandon, not realizing that inside the lake was Budha, Lord Soma's son, deep in meditation. When the waters were agitated, Budha opened his eyes and saw the most alluring woman he had ever seen and immediately fell in love with her. When Ila left the waterside, Budha emerged and followed her into the forest. Along the way, he asked one of her attendants about her—who she was and whether she had a husband or a lover.

'She's single and roams the forest at will,' the woman told him.

Relieved to know that Ila was unattached, Budha used his ascetic powers to learn more about her, and when he discovered her secret, he was even more intrigued. Hoping to press his suit, he went to the attendants and told them, 'I'm Budha, son of Soma, and I intend to make Ila mine. If, through my ascetic powers, I can find you all a home at the foot of this mountain and also husbands, will you then leave her side?' They all agreed, and so Budha turned them into Kimpurushis, who found Kimpurusha husbands and went to live at the foot of that secluded mountain. Then Budha approached Ila, and, professing his love for her, asked her to marry him. She accepted, and they lived together in that mountain forest for an entire spring.

One morning Ila woke up and found himself in a strange bed. No one was around, but when he went outside, he saw a man sitting beside a lake, worshipping the sun. 'Sorry for disturbing you,' he called, 'but could you tell me if you've seen my attendants. I came to this forest on a hunt with a whole army of men, and now they all seem to have disappeared. And also, I just woke up in a strange bed. Do you, by any chance, know what has happened?'

'Your attendants were all killed in a hailstorm,' Budha replied. 'And to get away from the hail and thunder, you took shelter in the hermitage and fell asleep.'

Ila was grieved by the tragic news about his attendants. 'How can I return to my kingdom now? All my men are gone,' he said despondently. 'I'll send a message to my son, Sasabindu, and tell him to rule in my absence. But where will I go?'

'Don't worry, brave one,' Budha said. 'You can certainly stay in my hermitage.'

So, for the next month, Ila stayed with Budha, and the two became close friends. Then, when a month had passed, Budha once again welcomed his wife.

In this way, alternating between friendship and spousal relationship, Ila spent eight months with Budha. Then, in the ninth month, when Ila became a woman again, she gave birth to a son, Pururavas. Budha was happy to have a son, but he was sad for his friend and wife, who was living a split life without even knowing it. He wished Ila to live fulsomely, and with this objective in mind, he gathered the best of Brahmins and asked them to help him perform the Ashvamedha yajna to propitiate Lord Shiva. At the conclusion of the yajna when Shiva manifested himself, Budha requested the god to liberate Ila from a dual life and restore him to full manhood. Shiva granted this, and Ila returned to Bahlika, where he lived out the rest of his life as its king.