Lord of Light

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Published by Gollancz

Extract

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It is said that fifty-three years after his liberation he returned from the Golden Cloud, to take up once again the gauntlet of Heaven, to oppose the Order of Life and the gods who ordained it so. His followers had prayed for his return, though their prayers were sin. Prayer should not trouble one who has gone on to Nirvana, no matter what the circumstances of his going. The wearers of the saffron robe prayed, however, that He of the Sword, Manjusri, should come again among them. The Boddhisatva is said to have heard . . .

He whose desires have been throttled,
who is independent of root,
whose pasture is emptiness –
signless and free –
his path is as unknowable
as that of birds across the heavens.
Dhammapada (93)

His followers called him Mahasamatman and said he was a god. He preferred to drop the Maha- and the -atman, however, and called himself Sam. He never claimed to be a god. But then, he never claimed not to be a god. Circumstances being what they were, neither admission could be of any benefit. Silence, though, could.

Therefore, there was mystery about him.

It was in the season of the rains . . .

It was well into the time of the great wetness . . .

It was in the days of the rains that their prayers went up, not from the fingering of knotted prayer cords or the spinning of prayer wheels, but from the great pray-machine in the monastery of Ratri, goddess of the Night.

The high-frequency prayers were directed upward through the atmosphere and out beyond it, passing into that golden cloud called the Bridge of the Gods, which circles the entire world, is seen as a bronze rainbow at night and is the place where the red sun becomes orange at midday.

Some of the monks doubted the orthodoxy of this prayer technique, but the machine had been built and was operated by Yama-Dharma, fallen, of the Celestial City; and, it was told, he had ages ago built the mighty thunder chariot of Lord Shiva: that engine that fled across the heavens belching gouts of fire in its wake.

Despite his fall from favor, Yama was still deemed mightiest of the artificers, though it was not doubted that the Gods of the City would have him to die the real death were they to learn of the pray-machine. For that matter, though, it was not doubted that they would have him to die the real death without the excuse of the pray-machine, also, were he to come into their custody. How he would settle this matter with the Lords of Karma was his own affair, though none doubted that when the time came he would find a way. He was half as old as the Celestial City itself, and not more than ten of the gods remembered the founding of that abode. He was known to be wiser even than the Lord Kubera in the ways of the Universal Fire. But these were his lesser Attributes. He was best known for another thing, though few men spoke of it. Tall but not overly so; big, but not heavy; his movements, slow and fluent. He wore red and spoke little.

He tended the pray-machine, and the giant metal lotus he had set atop the monastery roof turned and turned in its sockets.

A light rain was falling upon the building, the lotus and the jungle at the foot of the mountains. For six days he had offered many kilowatts of prayer, but the static kept him from being heard On High. Under his breath, he called upon the more notable of the current fertility deities, invoking them in terms of their most prominent Attributes.

A rumble of thunder answered his petition, and the small ape who assisted him chuckled. 'Your prayers and your curses come to the same, Lord Yama,' commented the ape. 'That is to say, nothing.'

'It has taken you seventeen incarnations to arrive at this truth?' said Yama. 'I can see then why you are still doing time as an ape.'

'Not so,' said the ape, whose name was Tak. 'My fall, while less spectacular than your own, nevertheless involved elements of personal malice on the part of—'

'Enough!' said Yama, turning his back to him.

Tak realized then that he might have touched upon a sore spot. In an attempt to find another subject for conversation, he crossed to the window, leapt onto its wide sill and stared upward.

'There is a break in the cloud cover, to the west,' he said.

Yama approached, followed the direction of his gaze, frowned, and nodded.

'Aye,' he said. 'Stay where you are and advise me.'

He moved to a bank of controls.

Overhead, the lotus halted in its turning, then faced the patch of bare sky.

'Very good,' he said. 'We're getting something.'

His hand moved across a separate control panel, throwing a series of switches and adjusting two dials.

Below them, in the cavernous cellars of the monastery, the signal was received and other preparations were begun: the host was made ready.

'The clouds are coming together again!' cried Tak.

'No matter, now,' said the other. 'We've hooked our fish. Out of Nirvana and into the lotus, he comes.'

There was more thunder, and the rain came down with a sound like hail upon the lotus. Snakes of blue lightning coiled, hissing, about the mountaintops.

Yama sealed a final circuit.

'How do you think he will take to wearing the flesh again?' asked Tak.

'Go peel bananas with your feet!'

Tak chose to consider this a dismissal and departed the chamber, leaving Yama to close down the machinery. He made his way along a corridor and down a wide flight of stairs. He reached the landing, and as he stood there he heard the sound of voices and the shuffling of sandals coming in his direction from out a side hall.

Without hesitating, he climbed the wall, using a series of carved panthers and an opposing row of elephants as handholds. Mounting a rafter, he drew back into a well of shadow and waited, unmoving.

Two dark-robed monks entered through the archway.

'So why can she not clear the sky for them?' said the first.

The second, an older, more heavily built man, shrugged. 'I am no sage that I can answer such questions. That she is anxious is obvious, or she should never have granted them this sanctuary, nor Yama this usage. But who can mark the limits of night?'

'Or the moods of a woman,' said the first. 'I have heard that even the priests did not know of her coming.'

'That may be. Whatever the case, it would seem a good omen.'

'So it would seem.'

They passed through another archway, and Tak listened to the sounds of their going until there was only silence.

Still, he did not leave his perch.

The 'she' referred to by the monks could only be the goddess Ratri herself, worshiped by the order that had given sanctuary to the followers of Great-Souled Sam, the Enlightened One. Now, Ratri, too, was to be numbered among those fallen from the Celestial City and wearing the skin of a mortal. She had every reason to be bitter over the whole affair; and Tak realized the chance she was taking in granting sanctuary, let alone being physically present during this undertaking. It could jeopardize any possibility of her future reinstatement if word of it got out and reached the proper ears. Tak recalled her as the dark-haired beauty with silver eyes, passing in her moon chariot of ebony and chromium, drawn by stallions black and white, tended by her guard, also black and white, passing up the Avenue of Heaven, rivaling even Sarasvati in her glory. His heart leapt within his hairy breast. He had to see her again. One night, long ago, in happier times and better form, he had danced with her, on a balcony under the stars. It had been for only a few moments. But he remembered; and it is a difficult thing to be an ape and to have such memories.

He climbed down from the rafter.

There was a tower, a high tower rising from the northeast corner of the monastery. Within that tower was a chamber. It was said to contain the indwelling presence of the goddess. It was cleaned daily, the linens changed, fresh incense burnt and a votive offering laid just within the door. That door was normally kept locked.

There were, of course, windows. The question as to whether a man could have entered by means of any of these windows must remain academic. Tak proved that an ape could.

Mounting the monastery roof, he proceeded to scale the tower, moving from brick to slippery brick, from projection to irregularity, the heavens growling doglike above him, until finally he clung to the wall just below the outer sill. A steady rain fell upon him. He heard a bird singing within. He saw the edge of a wet, blue scarf hanging over the sill.

He caught hold of the ledge and raised himself until he could peer inside.

Her back was to him. She wore a dark blue sari, and she was seated on a small bench at the opposite end of the room.

He clambered onto the sill and cleared his throat.

She turned quickly. She wore a veil, so that her features were indistinguishable. She regarded him through it, then rose and crossed the chamber.

He was dismayed. Her figure, once lithe, was wide about the waist; her walk, once the swaying of boughs, was a waddle; her complexion was too dark; even through the veil the lines of her nose and jaw were too pronounced.

He bowed his head.

'"And so you have drawn near to us, who at your coming have come home,"' he sang, '"as birds to their nest upon the tree."'

She stood, still as her statue in the main hall below.

'"Guard us from the she-wolf and the wolf, and guard us from the thief, oh Night, and so be good for us to pass."'

She reached out slowly and laid her hand upon his head.

'You have my blessing, little one,' she said, after a time. 'Unfortunately, that is all I can give. I cannot offer protection or render beauty, who lack these luxuries myself. What is your name?'

'Tak,' he told her.

She touched her brow.

'I once knew a Tak,' she said, 'in a bygone day, a distant place . . .'

'I am that Tak, madam.'

She seated herself upon the sill. After a time, he realized that she was weeping, within her veil.

'Don't cry, goddess. Tak is here. Remember Tak, of the Archives? Of the Bright Spear? He stands yet ready to do thy bidding.'

'Tak . . .' she said. 'Oh, Tak! You, too? I did not know! I never heard . . .'

'Another turning of the wheel, madam, and who knows? Things may yet be better than even once they were.'

Her shoulders shook. He reached out, drew back his hand.

She turned and took it.

After an age, she spoke:

'Not by the normal course of events shall we be restored or matters settled, Tak of the Bright Spear. We must beat our own path.'

'What mean you?' he inquired; then, 'Sam?'

She nodded.

'He is the one. He is our hope against Heaven, dear Tak. If he can be recalled, we have a chance to live again.'

'This is why you have taken this chance, why you yourself sit within the jaws of the tiger?'

'Why else? When there is no real hope we must mint our own. If the coin be counterfeit it still may be passed.'

'Counterfeit? You do not believe he was the Buddha?'

She laughed, briefly.

'Sam was the greatest charlatan in the memory of god or man. He was also the worthiest opponent Trimurti ever faced. Don't look so shocked at my saying it, Archivist! You know that he stole the fabric of his doctrine, path and attainment, the whole robe, from prehistorical forbidden sources. It was a weapon, nothing more. His greatest strength was his insincerity. If we could have *him* back . . .'

'Lady, saint or charlatan, he *is* returned.'

'Do not jest with me, Tak.'

'Goddess and Lady, I just left the Lord Yama shutting down the pray-machine, frowning his frown of success.'

'The venture was against such mighty odds . . . Lord Agni once said that no such thing could ever be done.'

Tak stood.

'Goddess Ratri,' he said, 'who, be he god or man, or anything between, knows more of such matters than Yama?'

'I have no answer for that question, Tak, because there is none. But how can you say of a certainty that he has netted us our fish?'

'Because he is Yama.'

'Then take my arm, Tak. Escort me again, as once you did. Let us view the sleeping Boddhisatva.'

He led her out the door, down the stairs, and into the chambers below.

Light, born not of torches but of the generators of Yama, filled the cavern. The bed, set upon a platform, was closed about on three sides by screens. Most of the machinery was also masked by screens and hangings. The saffron-robed monks who were in attendance moved silently about the great chamber. Yama, master artificer, stood at the bedside.

As they approached, several of the well-disciplined, imperturbable monks uttered brief exclamations. Tak then turned to the woman at his side and drew back a pace, his breath catching in his throat.

She was no longer the dumpy little matron with whom he had spoken. Once again did he stand at the side of Night immortal, of whom it has been written, 'The goddess has filled wide space, to its depths and its heights. Her radiance drives out the dark.'

He looked but a moment and covered his eyes. She still had this trace of her distant Aspect about her.

'Goddess . . .' he began.

'To the sleeper,' she stated. 'He stirs.'

They advanced to the bedstead.

Thereafter to be portrayed in murals at the ends of countless corridors, carved upon the walls of Temples and painted onto the ceilings of numerous palaces, came the awakening of he who was variously known as Mahasamatman, Kalkin, Manjusri, Siddhartha, Tathagatha, Binder, Maitreya, the Enlightened One, Buddha and Sam. At his left was the goddess of Night; to his right stood Death; Tak, the ape, was crouched at the foot of the bed, eternal comment upon the coexistence of the animal and the divine.

He wore an ordinary, darkish body of medium height and age; his features were regular and undistinguished; when his eyes opened, they were dark.

'Hail, Lord of Light!' It was Ratri who spoke these words.

The eyes blinked. They did not focus. Nowhere in the chamber was there any movement.

'Hail, Mahasamatman – Buddha!' said Yama.

The eyes stared ahead, unseeing.

'Hello, Sam,' said Tak.

The forehead creased slightly, the eyes squinted, fell upon Tak, moved on to the others.

'Where . . . ?' he asked, in a whisper.

'My monastery,' answered Ratri.

Without expression, he looked upon her beauty.

Then he shut his eyes and held them tightly closed, wrinkles forming at their corners. A grin of pain made his mouth a bow, his teeth the arrows, clenched.

'Are you truly he whom we have named?' asked Yama.

He did not answer.

'Are you he who fought the army of Heaven to a standstill on the banks of the Vedra?'

The mouth slackened.

'Are you he who loved the goddess of Death?'

The eyes flickered. A faint smile came and went across the lips.

'It is he,' said Yama; then, 'Who are you, man?'

'I? I am nothing,' replied the other. 'A leaf caught in a whirlpool, perhaps. A feather in the wind . . .'

'Too bad,' said Yama, 'for there are leaves and feathers enough in the world for me to have labored so long only to increase their number. I wanted me a man, one who might continue a war interrupted by his absence – a man of power who could oppose with that power the will of gods. I thought you were he.'

'I am' – he squinted again – 'Sam. I am Sam. Once – long ago . . . I *did* fight, didn't I? Many times . . .'

'You were Great-Souled Sam, the Buddha. Do you remember?'

'Maybe I was . . .' A slow fire was kindled in his eyes.

'Yes,' he said then. 'Yes, I was. Humblest of the proud, proudest of the humble. I fought. I taught the Way for a time. I fought again, taught again, tried politics, magic, poison . . . I fought one great battle so terrible the sun itself hid its face from the slaughter – with men and gods, with animals and demons, with spirits of the earth and air, of fire and water, with slizzards and horses, swords and chariots—'

'And you lost,' said Yama.

'Yes, I did, didn't I? But it was quite a showing we gave them, wasn't it? You, deathgod, were my charioteer. It all comes back to me now. We were taken prisoner and the Lords of Karma were to be our judges. You escaped them by the will-death and the Way of the Black Wheel. I could not.'

'That is correct. Your past was laid out before them. You were judged.' Yama regarded the monks who now sat upon the floor, their heads bowed, and he lowered his voice. 'To have you to die the real death would have made you a martyr. To have permitted you to walk the world, in any form, would have left the door open for your return. So, as you stole your teachings from the Gottama of another place and time, did they steal the tale of the end of that one's days among men. You were judged worthy of Nirvana. Your *atman* was projected, not into another body, but into the great magnetic cloud that encircles this planet. That was over half a century ago. You are now officially an avatar of Vishnu, whose teachings were misinterpreted by some of his more zealous followers. You, personally, continued to exist only in the form of self-perpetuating wavelengths, which I succeeded in capturing.'

Sam closed his eyes.

'And you *dared* to bring me back?'

'That is correct.'

'I was aware of my condition the entire time.'

'I suspected as much.'

His eyes opened, blazing. 'Yet you dared recall me from *that*?'

'Yes.'

Sam bowed his head. 'Rightly are you called deathgod, Yama-Dharma. You have snatched away from me the ultimate experience. You have broken upon the dark stone of your will that which is beyond all comprehension and mortal splendor. Why could you not have left me as I was, in the sea of being?'

'Because a world has need of your humility, your piety, your great teaching and your Machiavellian scheming.'

'Yama, I'm old,' he said. 'I'm as old as man upon this world. I was one of the First, you know. One of the very first to come here, to build, to settle. All of the others are dead now, or are gods – *dei ex machini* . . . The chance was mine also, but I let it go by. Many times. I never wanted to be a god, Yama. Not really. It was only later, only when I saw what they were doing, that I began to gather what power I could to me. It was too late, though. They were too strong. Now I just want to sleep the sleep of ages, to know again the Great Rest, the perpetual bliss, to hear the songs the stars sing on the shores of the great sea.'

Ratri leaned forward and looked into his eyes. 'We need you, Sam,' she said.

'I know, I know,' he told her. 'It's the eternal recurrence of the anecdote. You've a willing horse, so flog him another mile.' But he smiled as he said it, and she kissed his brow.

Tak leaped into the air and bounced upon the bed.

'Mankind rejoices,' observed the Buddha.

Yama handed him a robe and Ratri fitted him with slippers.

Recovering from the peace which passeth understanding takes time. Sam slept. Sleeping, he dreamed; dreaming, he cried out, or just cried. He had no appetite; but Yama had found him a body both sturdy and in perfect health, one well able to bear the psychosomatic conversion from divine withdrawal.

But he would sit for an hour, unmoving, staring at a pebble or a seed or a leaf. And on these occasions, he could not be aroused.

Yama saw in this a danger, and he spoke of it with Ratri and Tak. 'It is not good that he withdraw from the world in this way, now,' he said. 'I have spoken with him, but it is as if I addressed the wind. He cannot recover that which he has left behind. The very attempt is costing him his strength.'

'Perhaps you misread his efforts,' said Tak.

'What mean you?'

'See how he regards the seed he has set before him? Consider the wrinkling at the edges of his eyes.'

'Yes? What of it?'

'He squints. Is his vision impaired?'

'It is not.'

'Then why does he squint?'

'To better study the seed.'

'Study? That is not the Way, as once he taught it. Yet he *does* study. He does not meditate, seeking within the object that which leads to release of the subject. No.'

'What then does he do?'

'The reverse.'

'The reverse?'

'He does study the object, considering its ways, in an effort to bind himself. He seeks within it an excuse to live. He tries once more to wrap himself within the fabric of Maya, the illusion of the world.'

'I believe you are right, Tak!' It was Ratri who had spoken. 'How can we assist him in his efforts?'

'I am not certain, mistress.'

Yama nodded, his dark hair glistening in a bar of sunlight that fell across the narrow porch.

'You have set your finger upon the thing I could not see,' he acknowledged. 'He has not yet fully returned, though he wears a body, walks upon human feet, talks as we do. His thought is still beyond our ken.'

'What then shall we do?' repeated Ratri.

'Take him on long walks through the countryside,' said Yama. 'Feed him delicacies. Stir his soul with poetry and song. Find him strong drink to drink – there is none here in the monastery. Garb him in bright-hued silks. Fetch him a courtesan or three. Submerge him in living again. It is only thus that he may be freed from the chains of God. Stupid of me not to have seen it sooner . . .'

'Not really, deathgod,' said Tak.

The flame that is black leapt within Yama's eyes, and then he smiled. 'I am repaid, little one,' he acknowledged, 'for the comments I, perhaps thoughtlessly, let fall upon thy hairy ears. I apologize, ape-one. You are truly a man, and one of wit and perception.'

Tak bowed before him.

Ratri chuckled.

'Tell us, clever Tak – for mayhap we have been gods too long, and so lack the proper angle of vision – how shall we proceed in this matter of rehumanizing him, so as to best serve the ends we seek?'

Tak bowed him then to Ratri.

'As Yama has proposed,' he stated. 'Today, mistress, you take him for a walk in the foothills. Tomorrow, Lord Yama conducts him as far as the edge of the forest. The following day I shall take him amidst the trees and the grasses, the flowers and the vines. And we shall see. We shall.'

'So be it,' said Yama, and so it was.

In the weeks that followed, Sam came to look forward to these walks with what appeared at first a mild anticipation, then a moderate enthusiasm, and finally a blazing eagerness. He took to going off unaccompanied for longer and longer stretches of time: at first, it was for several hours in the morning; then, morning and evening. Later, he stayed away all day, and on occasion a day and a night.

At the end of the third week, Yama and Ratri discussed it on the porch in the early hours of morning.

'This thing I do not like,' said Yama. 'We cannot insult him by forcing our company upon him now, when he does not wish it. But there is danger out there, especially for one born again such as he. I would that we knew how he spends his hours.'

'But whatever he does, it is helping him to recover,' said Ratri, gulping a sweetmeat and waving a fleshy hand. 'He is less withdrawn. He speaks more, even jesting. He drinks of the wine we bring him. His appetite is returning.'

'Yet, if he should meet with an agent of Trimurti, the final doom may come to pass.'

Ratri chewed slowly.

'It is not likely, though, that such should be abroad in this country, in these days,' she stated. 'The animals will see him as a child and will not harm him. Men would consider him a holy hermit. The demons fear him of old, and so respect him.'

But Yama shook his head. 'Lady, it is not so simple. Though I have dismantled much of my machinery and hidden it hundreds of leagues from here, such a massive trafficking of energies as I employed cannot have passed unnoticed. Sooner or later this place will be visited. I used screens and baffling devices, but this general area must have appeared in certain quarters as though the Universal Fire did a dance upon the map. Soon we must move on. I should prefer to wait until our charge is fully recovered, but . . .'

'Could not certain natural forces have produced the same energy effects as your workings?'

'Yes, and they do occur in this vicinity, which is why I chose it as our base – so it may well be that nothing will come of it. Still, I doubt this. My spies in the villages report no unusual activities now. But on the day of his return, riding upon the crest of the storm, some say the thunder chariot passed, hunting through the heavens and across the countryside. This was far from here, but I cannot believe that there was no connection.'

'Yet, it has not returned.'

'Not that we know of. But I fear . . .'

'Then let us depart at once. I respect your forebodings too well. You have more of the power upon you than any other among the Fallen. For me, it is a great strain even to assume a pleasing shape for more than a few minutes . . .'

'What powers I possess,' said Yama, refilling her teacup, 'are intact because they were not of the same order as yours.'

He smiled then, showing even rows of long, brilliant teeth. This smile caught at the edge of a scar upon his left cheek and reached up to the corner of his eye. He winked to put a period to it and continued, 'Much of my power is in the form of knowledge, which even the Lords of Karma could not have wrested from me. The power of most of the gods, however, is predicated upon a special physiology, which they lose in part when incarnated into a new body. The mind, somehow remembering, after a time alters any body to a certain extent, engendering a new homeostasis, permitting a gradual return of power. Mine does return quickly, though, and it is with me fully now. But even if it were not, I have my knowledge to use as a weapon – and that is a power.'

Ratri sipped her tea. 'Whatever its source, if your power says move, then move we must. How soon?'

Yama opened a pouch of tobacco and rolled a cigarette as he spoke. His dark, supple fingers, she noted, always had about their movement that which was like the movements of one who played upon an instrument of music.

'I should say let us not tarry here more than another week or ten days. We must wean him from this countryside by then.'

She nodded. 'Where to then?'

'Some small southern kingdom, perhaps, where we may come and go undisturbed.'

He lit the cigarette, breathed smoke.

'I've a better idea,' said she. 'Know that under a mortal name am I mistress of the Palace of Kama in Khaipur.'

'The Fornicatorium, madam?'

She frowned. 'As such is it often known to the vulgar, and do not call me "madam" in the same breath – it smacks of an ancient jest. It is a place of rest, pleasure, holiness and much of my revenue. There, I feel, would be a good hiding place for our charge while he makes his recovery and we our plans.'