A few miles to the north of Shillong, the chief town of the Province of Assam,** there is a fertile and pleasant hill known as the Hill of Raitong, which is one of the most famous spots in ancient folklore, and for which is claimed the distinction of being the place where the custom of suttee - wife-sacrifice of the Hindus - originated. The legend runs as follows:

Many ages ago there lived a great Siem (Chief) who ruled over large territories and whose sceptre swayed over many tribes and clans of people. As befitted such a great Siem, his consort, the Mahadei, was a woman of great beauty: her figure was erect and lissom and all her movements easy and graceful as the motion of the palms in the summer breeze; her hair was long and flowing enfolding her like a wreathing cloud; her teeth were even as the rims of a cowrie; her lips were red as the precious coral and fragrant as the flower of Lasubon; and her face was fair like unto the face of a goddess. Strange to relate, the names of this famous royal couple have not been transmitted to posterity.

It came to pass that affairs of the State necessitated the absence of the Siem from home for a protracted period. He appointed deputies to govern the village and to control his household during the interval, while the Mahadei, who was unto him as the apple of his eye, was placed under the joint guardianship of her own and his own family. When he had made all satisfactory arrangements he took his departure and went on his long journey accompanied by the good wishes of his people.

Among the subjects of the Siem was a poor beggar lad, who was looked upon as being half-witted, for he spent his days roaming about the village clothed in filthy rags, his head and face covered with ashes like a wandering fakir. He never conversed with any of the villagers, but kept muttering to himself incessantly, lamenting his own forlorn and friendless condition.

His name was U Raitong. Formerly he had been a happy and well-cared-for lad, surrounded and loved by many relatives and kindred, until a terrible epidemic swept through the village and carried away all his family and left him orphaned and alone, without sustenance and without a relative to stand by his bedside in time of sickness or to perform the
funeral rites over his body when he died. Overwhelmed by grief and sorrow, U Raitong vowed a rash vow that all the days of his life should be spent in mourning the death of his kindred; thus it was that he walked about the village lamenting to himself and wearing ragged clothes. His neighbours, not knowing about the vow, thought that sorrow had turned his head, so they treated him as an idiot and pitied him and gave him alms.

His condition was so wretched and his clothes so tattered that he became a proverb in the country, and to this day, when the Khasis wish to describe one fallen into extreme poverty and wretchedness, they say, “as poor as U Raitong.”

At night time, however, U Raitong considered himself free from the obligations of his rash vow, and when he retired to his rickety cabin on the outskirts of the village he divested himself of his rags and arrayed himself in fine garments, and would play for hours on his sharati (flute), a bamboo instrument much in vogue among the Khasis to this day. He was a born musician, and constant practice had made him an accomplished player, and never did flute give forth sweeter and richer music than did the sharati of U Raitong as he played by stealth in the hours of the night when all the village was asleep.

The melodies he composed were so enthralling that he often became oblivious to all his surroundings and abandoned himself to the charms of his own subtle music. His body swayed and trembled with pure joy and delight as he gave forth strain after strain from his sharati; yet so cautious was he that none of his neighbours suspected that he possessed any gifts, for he feared to let it be known lest it should interfere with the performance of his vow.

It happened one night that the Mahadei was restless and unable to sleep, and as she lay awake she heard the faint strains of the most sweet music wafted on the air. She imagined that it was coming from the fairies who were said to inhabit certain parts of the forest, and she listened enraptured until the sounds ceased. When it stopped, a feeling of great loneliness came over her, so overawing that she could not summon enough courage to speak about the strange music she had heard. She went about her household duties with her thoughts far away and longing for the night to come in the hope that the music would be wafted to her again.

The following night, and for many successive nights, the Mahadei lay awake to listen, and was always rewarded by hearing the soft sweet strains of some musical instrument floating on the air till she imagined
the room to be full of some beautiful beings singing the sweetest melodies that human ears ever heard. When it ceased, as it always did before daybreak, the feeling of desolation was intense, till her whole mind became absorbed with thoughts of the mysterious music.

The fascination grew until at last it became overpowering and she could not resist the desire to know whence the sounds proceeded. She crept stealthily from her room one night, and following the direction of the strains, she walked through the village and was surprised to find that the music emerged from the dilapidated hut of U Raitong.

The heart of the Mahadei was touched, for she thought that the fairies in tenderness and pity came to cheer and to comfort the poor idiot with their music, and she stood there to listen. The strains which she could hear but faintly in her own room now broke upon her in all their fullness and richness till her whole being was ravished by them.

Before dawn the sounds suddenly ceased, and the Mahadei retraced her steps stealthily and crept back to her room without being observed by anyone. After this she stole out of her house every night and went to listen to what she believed to be fairy-music outside the hut of U Raitong.

One night, when the music was stronger than usual, the Mahadei drew near and peeped through a crevice in the door, and to her astonishment, instead of the fairies she had pictured, she saw that it was U Raitong, the supposed idiot, who was playing on his sharati, but a Raitong so changed from the one she had been accustomed to see about the village that she could scarcely believe her own eyes. He was well and tastefully dressed and his face was alight with joy, while his body moved with graceful motions as he swayed with rapture in harmony with the rhythm of his wild music. She stood spellbound, as much moved by the sight that met her eyes as she had been by the charm of the music, and, forgetful of her marriage vows and her duty to her husband, she fell deeply and irrevocably in love with U Raitong.

Time passed, and the Mahadei continued to visit the hut of U Raitong by stealth, drawn by her passionate love for him even more than by the fascination of his sharati. At first U Raitong was unaware that he was being spied upon, but when he discovered the Mahadei in his hut, he was greatly troubled, and tried to reason with her against coming with as much sternness as was becoming in one of his class to show to one so much above him in rank. But she overruled all his scruples, and before long the intensity of her love for him and the beauty of her person awoke
similar feelings in him and he fell a victim to her wicked and unbridled passion.

The months rolled on and the time for the return of the Siem was advancing apace. People began to discuss the preparations for celebrating his return, and everyone evinced the most lively interest except the Mahadei. It was noticed that she, the most interested person of all, appeared the most unconcerned, and people marvelled to see her so cold and indifferent; but one day the reason became clear when it was announced that a son had been born to the Mahadei and that her guardians had locked her up in one of the rooms of the court, pending the arrival of the Siem. She offered no resistance and put forward no justification, but when questioned as to the identity of her child’s father she remained resolutely silent.

When the Siem arrived and heard of his wife’s infidelity he was bowed down with shame and grief, and vowed that he would enforce the extreme penalty of the law on the man who had sullied her honour, but neither persuasion nor coercion could extract from the Mahadei his name.

It was necessary for the well-being of the State, as well as for the satisfaction of the Siem, that the culprit should be found; so the Siem sent a mandate throughout his territory calling upon all the male population, on penalty of death, to attend a great State Durban, when the Siem and his ministers would sit in judgement to discover the father of the child of the faithless Mahadei.

Never in the history of Durbars was seen such a multitude gathered together as was seen on that day when all the men, both young and old, appeared before the Siem to pass through the test laid down by him. When all had assembled, the Siem ordered a mat to be brought and placed in the centre, and the babe lad upon it; after which he commanded every man to walk round the mat in procession and, as he passed, to offer a plantain to the child, inasmuch as it was believed that the instincts of the babe would lead him to accept a plantain from the hand of his own father and from no other.

The long procession filed past one by one, but the babe gave no sign, and the Siem and his ministers were baffled and perplexed. They demanded to know what man had absented himself, but when the roll was called the number was complete. Some one in the throng shouted the name of U Raitong, at which many laughed, for no one deemed him to be sane; other voices said mockingly, “Send for him”; others said, “why trouble
about such a witless creature? He is but as a dog or a rat.” Thus the Durbar was divided, but the ministers, unwilling to pass over even the most hapless, decided to send for him and to put him through the test like the other men.

When the Siem’s messengers arrived at the hut they found U Raitong just as usual; dressed in filthy rags and muttering to himself, his face covered with ashes. He arose immediately and followed the men to the place of Durbar, and as he came people pitied him, for he looked so sad and forlorn and defenceless that it seemed a shame to put such a one through the test. A plantain was put into his hand and he was told to walk past the mat. As soon as the babe saw him he began to crow with delight and held out his hands for the plantain, but he took no notice of the well-dressed people who crowded round.

There was a loud commotion when the secret was discovered, and the Siem looked ashamed and humiliated to find that one so unseemly and poor was proved to be the lover of his beautiful wife. The assembly were awed at the spectacle, and many of them raised their voices in thanksgiving to the deity whom they considered to have directed the course of events and brought the guilty to judgement.

The Siem commanded his ministers to pronounce judgement, and they with one accord proclaimed that he should be burned to death, without the performance of any rites and that no hand should gather his bones for burial. In this decision all the throng acquiesced, for such was the law and the decree.

U Raitong received the verdict with indifference as one who had long known and become reconciled to his fate, but he asked one boon, and that was permission to build his own pyre and play a dirge for himself. The Siem and the people were astonished to hear him speak in clear tones instead of the blubbering manner in which he had always been known to speak. Nobody raised an objection to his request, so he received permission to build his own pyre and to play his own dirge.

Accordingly, on the morrow U Raitong arose early and gathered a great pile of dry firewood and laid it carefully till the pyre was larger than the pyres built for the cremation of Siems and the great ones of the land. After finishing the pyre he returned to his lonely hut and divested himself of his filthy rags and arrayed himself in the fine garments which he used to wear in the hours of the night when he abandoned himself to music; he then took the sharati in his hand and sallied forth to his terrible doom. As he marched towards the pyre he played on his sharati, and the
sound of his dirge was carried by the air to every dwelling in the village, and so beautiful was it and so enchanting, so full of wild pathos and woe, that it stirred every heart. People flocked after him, wondering at the changed appearance of U Raitong and fascinated by the marvellous and mysterious music such as they had never before heard, which arrested and charmed every ear.

When the procession reached the pyre, U Raitong stooped and lighted the dry logs without a shudder or a delay. Then once more he began to play on his sharati and marched three times round the pyre, and as he marched he played such doleful and mournful melodies that his hearers raised their voices in a loud wail in sympathy, so that the wailing and the mourning at the pyre of U Raitong was more sincere and impressive than the mourning made for the greatest men in the country.

At the end of his third round U Raitong suddenly stopped his music, planted his sharati point downward in the earth, and leaped upon the burning pyre and perished.

While these events were taking place outside, the Mahadei remained a close prisoner in her room, and no whisper of what was transpiring was allowed to reach her. But her heart was heavy with apprehension for her lover, and when she heard the notes of a sharati she knew it could be none other than U Raitong, and that the secret had been discovered and that he was being sent to his doom.

As before, the notes of the sharati seemed to call her irresistibly, and with almost superhuman strength she burst open the door of her prison. Great as was her excitement and her desire to get away, she took precautions to cover her escape. Seeing a string of cowries with which her child had been playing, she hastily fastened them to the feet of a kitten that was in the room, so that whenever the kitten moved the noise of the cowries jingling on the floor of the room would lead those outside to think that it was the mahadei herself still moving about; then she sped forth to the hill in the direction of the sound of the sharati and the wailing. When she arrived at the pyre, U Raitong had just taken his fatal leap. She pushed her way resolutely through the dense and wailing crowd, and before anyone could anticipate her action she too had leaped into the flaming furnace to die by the side of her lover.

The Siem alone of all the people in the village had withstood the fascination of the dirge. He sat in his chamber morose and outraged, brooding on his calamity. Just when the Mahadei was leaping into the flames a strange thing happened in the Siem’s chamber - the head-cloth (tapmoh) of his wife was blown in a mysterious manner so that it fell at
his feet although there was not enough breeze to cause a leaf to rustle. When the Siem saw it he said, “By this token my wife must be dead.” Still hearing sounds coming from her room, he tried to take no heed of the omen. The foreboding, however, grew so strong that he got up to investigate, and when he opened the door of the room where the Mahadei had been imprisoned he found it empty, save for a kitten with a string of cowries fastened to its feet.

He knew instinctively whither she had gone, and in the hope of averting further scandal he hurried in her wake towards the pyre on the hill, but he was too late. When he arrived on the scene he found only her charred remains.

The news of the unparalleled devotion of the Mahadei to her lover spread abroad throughout the land and stirred the minds of men and women in all countries. The chaste wives of India, when they heard of it, said to one another, “We must not allow the unholy passion of an unchaste woman to become more famous than the sacred love of holy matrimony. Henceforth we will offer our bodies on the altar of death, on the pyre of our husbands, to prove our devotion and fidelity.” Thus originated the custom of suttee (wife-sacrifice) in many parts of India.

The Khasis were so impressed by the suitability of the sharati to express sorrow and grief that they have adopted that instrument ever since to play their dirge at times of cremation.

The sharati of U Raitong, which he planted in the earth as he was about to leap to his doom, took root, and a clump of bamboos grew from it, distinguishable from all other bamboos by having their branches forking downwards. It is commonly maintained to this day that there are clumps of bamboos forking downwards to be found in plenty on the Hill of Raitong.


** At the time this folktale was written, Shillong was the capital of Assam. Meghalaya had not yet come to existence.