

The Luring of Enkidu

A young hunter ran into the hut of his father, a shepherd, and hid himself in a corner.

“What’s wrong with you?” his father shouted. “Why do you behave like that?”

The hunter opened his mouth and cried out, “O father, there is a strange man I’ve seen in the forest and wandering over the steppes. How many times have I complained to you that my traps were broken and robbed! Well, today I saw the thief—a terrifying sight, father, a man whose strength is like that of the hosts of heaven! He filled the pits that I had dug. He broke open my traps. He freed the animals; he carried them off as a mother lion might carry off her whelps!”

“Come, come!” said the shepherd. “You’re seeing things, son! The game is scarce; you’ve been careless with your traps!”

“The hair springs out of his head like a field of grain, and he has the horns of a wild beast!”

“If he stole your catch of game, my son, why didn’t you stop him?”

“He is taller and more powerful than Gilgamesh the King. I was numbed with fear!”

“If what you say is true, son, then we must report the matter to the King. But if you have lied, we will be in disgrace forever!”

The shepherd and his son went into the city of Uruk to make their complaint. But there the populace were already spreading rumors about the wild man. Some said, “He is covered with hair from head to foot,” and others, “He is taller than a giant and eats grass with the gazelles!”

It was the eldest of the elders who led the hunter and his father before the King. “O Gilgamesh,” said the elder, “there is a wild man that terrorizes the countryside. He robs the hunter of his game and disperses the herds of the shepherd. He turns all who see him numb with fear—indeed I’ve heard that he is taller and more powerful than Gilgamesh the King!”

Gilgamesh, who feared nothing, might have been expected to say, “Then it’s I who will go out and subdue him and bring him captive to the city!” Not at all; he sent to the temple of Ishtar for a certain priestess, one called Harim, servant of the goddess.

He said to her, “Harim, I have a certain task for you; it is one that turns the boldest hunters numb with fear!”

“Then I am afraid,” said Harim.

The eldest of the elders spoke angrily, "This is not a girl's task, O King; it is a task for a brave man—a hero!"

"Tut tut," said Gilgamesh. "It is a girl's task of smiles and charm. Go, Harim; soften the heart of the wild man and bring him back to the city!"

Harim was led by the hunter to the edge of the forest, and she noted that he began to tremble with fear. "Go back to the hut of your father," she commanded. "If I can tame the wild man, I will lead him into the city alone."

The hunter was shamed by the girl's bravery. "Do not enter the forest, O Harim; I myself will go." But the priestess laughed at him and sent him home.

She went among the dark cedars; she listened to the sounds of birds and of monkeys chattering. She noted the bits of sunlight that filtered through the branches and lit up flowers, moss, and bracken on the forest floor. "How peaceful a place this is! How could any evil thing lurk here?" Harim found a fresh spring bubbling with cool water. She sat beside it on a stone, untied her sandals, and dipped her feet in the water.

Enkidu came to the place with the small wild horse and the gazelle. As they drew near, the two beasts became nervous, sniffed the air, and fled. But Enkidu stood still; he wondered what new danger was near, what unknown beast might have come to the water.

When he saw the girl sitting there his breath failed and he was overcome. He had not yet seen a human being, and this creature seemed to him the most admirable, the most enchanting being that he had ever seen. He stood quietly in order not to frighten her.

Harim gazed at his giant figure, his soaring horns, and his unkempt looks and would have run away, but she could not move. She opened her mouth to scream and could not make a sound. She was numb with terror. And Enkidu noting this remained quiet; he had made friends with many timid creatures and he knew their ways.

When the priestess saw the gentleness of his manner, her courage returned to her somewhat. She called out shyly, "Hello!"

Enkidu knew no words. He could babble somewhat as the monkeys did. He could bark quite like a fox, or trill like many birds. He had various calls of greeting for his wild friends, but this new animal made sounds that he could not understand.

He neither barked nor roared, but stood perplexed looking at the girl. Again she spoke, and now held out her hands to him in greeting.

Enkidu approached slowly and sat on the earth beside the white feet of Harim. She said all sorts of things to him and he understood nothing. She asked him many questions and he could not reply. But he felt ecstasy in his heart, and great contentment in merely sitting beside her.

How easy was her conquest of Enkidu! Harim smiled, but she now began to feel a new sort of fear. How could she lead this great fellow, so gentle and so innocent, back to the city of Uruk? Would the people set on him and kill him? Would they jeer at him? Would the King have him put into a cage and carried through the streets on the backs of soldiers? She shuddered.

No, first she must teach him the ways of people, the conformity of life.

“Al-ka ti-ba in-a ga-ag-ga-ri !” said Harim. “Come, rise from the ground!” But the wild man did not understand. Thus, she taught him the word for standing, and then after that, the word for sitting. She taught him the words for walking, running, talking, laughing, eating, and he repeated each one, learning it. She taught him the words for trees and for stones and for water, for earth and for the trailing vines that grew beside the spring, and for the spring itself. She taught him the words for feet and hands and the names of all the fingers and all the myriad words of love.

Thus patiently, Harim taught Enkidu to be like ordinary men. She cut his hair and combed it in the way of people of the city. She made him bathe; she tore her long tunic into two parts, making of one-half a garment for Enkidu, keeping the other half for herself.

Again she spoke to him, and now he understood, “A-na-tal-ka En-ki-du ki-ma ili ta-ba-as-si!” – “I gaze upon you, Enkidu; you are like a god!”

He brought her gifts—all the things that he had come to know and love in the forest and from the open steppes; wild cucumbers and cassia melon, grapes and figs and caper buds from the dry rocks. He brought her blossoms of golden mimosa and fragrant branches of jasmine.

After some time had passed Harim said, “Now I will lead Enkidu out among the people and everyone will admire him!” But still she feared for his life so she took him first to the hut of the shepherd.

At the edge of the forest Enkidu stopped and turned back. He was overcome with regret; how could he leave forever his friends of the woods and wild places? Who would protect them? Who would release them from the traps? How could he leave behind his friend the little wild horse, or the gazelle, the rabbits, the monkeys that had taught him to play games?

But as he approached they leaped away startled. The rabbit hid trembling in the grass and the birds took off with a wild flutter of wings.

Enkidu threw himself to the ground, weeping. “O Harim, what have I done? How have I made all my friends into strangers? Why do they run from me?”

“Enkidu is no longer a wild creature. He is no longer a beast of the forest and the open plain. Enkidu is now a man. He will live among men and be eminent among men!”

Enkidu followed regretfully as the priestess led him toward the hut of the shepherd. This man greeted him with awe and admiration, but his son fled from the place and hid in the sheepfold. After some time he returned, running. “Father, a lion has entered the fold! It is devouring the lambs!”

Enkidu went to the sheepfold where again he wrestled with the lion, his friend who no longer knew him. Again he overcame the beast, but he let it go free. He lifted the lambs gently, washing and tending the ones that bled. To his great joy they did not shun him or run away. Neither did the young calves nor the barnyard fowl. A dog followed him wagging its tail. A cat smoothed its fur against his legs, and again he was content.

In the hut of the shepherd Enkidu learned to sit on a chair and to wash his hands before eating. He learned how to care for animals, to make plants grow, and to build with mud and brick and reeds. He learned to play on a flute. He ate bread. There he tasted the strong sesame wine and drank seven cups. His face shone, he rejoiced; he sang.

Harim smiled. “Now Enkidu has become like a man, we shall go into the city!”