

Kalidasa, the greatest poet-cum-dramatist India has ever produced, was one of the 'Nine Gems' who were cherished by King Vikramaditya (380-413 A.D.) in the Gupta capital at Ujjain. According to the American scholar Ryder "Kalidasa ranks not with Anacreon and Horace and Shelley, but with Sophocles, Virgil, and Milton." He was appreciated in full measure during his lifetime as is at present.

A great love of life and an enduring passion for nature's entrancing beauty are the happiest features of his writings.

Here, in the following pages, is a faithful rendering of the Great Dramatist's *Shakuntala*, *Vikramorvasie*, *The Raghuvansa* and *Meghdoot* into eminently readable stories written in a language, lucid, vivid, lively and captivating, capturing the style and spirit of the original. Kalidasa tells of saints and sinners, of gods and men, of angels and devils, of kings and commoners, of myths and miracles, of the tender and idyllic romance of a mighty king and a beauteous hermit maiden, of the passionate love that sprang up between a beautiful nymph and a mortal man, of the daring exploits of the heroic Rama to win back his captured bride, Sita, and of the frenzied message of despair and grief entrusted to a passing cloud that wafted across the summer skies.

The dextrous plots, the interconnection of incidents, the skilful characterisation, the happy similes and all that this book presents have an indefinable power of delighting the reader.

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TALES FROM KALIDASA

By

SUNA K SURVEYOR



JAICO PUBLISHING HOUSE
125, MAHATMA GANDHI ROAD, BOMBAY 1

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Jaico Book Edition published July 1957

Printed in India by Michael Andrades at The Bombay Chronicle Press, Red House, Parsi Bazar Street, Fort, Bombay and published by Jaman H Shah for Jaico Publishing House 125, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bombay 1

JAICO PUBLISHING HOUSE
BOMBAY — NEW DELHI — CALCUTTA — MADRAS

To

My angel mother

*who taught me to love all things
beautiful, noble, and ideal
this book is humbly dedicated*

CONTENTS

	PAGE
1 Shakuntala or The Lost Ring	9
2 Vikramorvasie or The Hero and the Nymph	63
3 The Raghuvansa or A Saga of Old Ind	101
4 Meghdoot or The Messenger-Cloud	195
5 Index and Glossary	219

SHAKUNTALA
OR
THE LOST RING

CHAPTER I

NO SOUND DISTURBED the peace and stillness of the primeval forest. It was a stillness instinct with the music of silence,—that vast, immutable silence of the Indian jungles, unbroken save by the whispering of the wind among the trees, the unexpected cry of a bird calling to its mate.

Into this great stillness of nature there stole a flying creature,—a graceful, brown slender-limbed antelope, which flashed across the vast expanses like a whirlwind, moving faster and faster, glancing behind from time to time, its ears quivering, and its lithe, fragile body tense and trembling with fear and excitement.

On and on ran the fleet-footed ruminant in swift flight, its lean, quicksilver legs barely skimming the earth, as it rushed through the air impelled by a divine motive force.

In the wake of the flying antelope, came a chariot in hot pursuit, shattering the tranquillity of the forest. The loud clanking of its harness, and the sound of the horses' hoofs as they met the hard ground with a thud, reverberated through the jungle like a minor earthquake that shook the forest fastness to its depths, startling its myriad denizens out of their torpor and somnolence into sudden terror and activity.

In the swiftly-moving chariot, armed with a bow and arrow, sat Dushyanta, King of India, a descendant of the mighty race of Puru.

"Charloteer," he cried excitedly "Drive faster,—

faster! How swiftly runs that antelope before our chariot!—I can hardly see him now—Faster!—Faster! Look how far that little creature has led us from our party Ah my horses show their mettle now Why, they could verily outrun the steeds of heaven!"

Intoxicated by the chase exhilarated by the immense speed of the chariot, as it whirled past the trees in hairbreadth pursuit of the running deer, the King laid his arrow to his bow shouting with joy as he made ready to track down and kill his victim

Dushyanta was on the point of releasing his well-aimed snaf, when a voice rang out through the forest, arresting his hand

"Kill not the gentle creature O King!" it cried "It belongs to our grove—Do not destroy it, we pray you!"

Amazed, Dushyanta lowered his hand at once

"Who is it begs the life of the antelope of me?" he asked wonderingly of his charioteer,

"Sire," replied the charioteer "It is the hermits of this grove They have placed themselves in the way of your aim, and are begging Your Majesty to spare the animal's life"

"Stop the horses at once, then," commanded the King soberly

The three hermits then approached the King, making obeisance before him

"Hail, great King!" said the spokesman of the three "We beg thee not to kill this animal, for it belongs to our hermitage, and is sacred to us Spare the tender life of this innocent and harmless creature, we pray thee, for it is no proper prey for thy steel shafts It would become thee better, great King, to succour the weak not agonise the innocent"

Dushyanta was much perturbed at his own thoughtlessness in hunting within the precincts of a sacred hermitage Bowing meekly before the deserved rebuke, he accepted it without demur

"Tis well" observed the hermit "Thy action becomes

the nobility of Puru's great dynasty Thy mercy, great King, will be amply rewarded Thou shalt bear a son of priceless worth, whose dominion shall encompass the entire Universe "

Solemnly raising their hands, the saintly ascetics gave their benediction to Dushyanta, who acknowledged it with a meekness of manner that contrasted strongly with his recent jubilation over hunting down his helpless quarry

"Mighty King," continued the hermit "You see before you here on the banks of the river Malini, the hermitage of the illustrious sage, Kanwa Pray deign to accept its simple hospitality When you witness the sacred rites of the holy men, you shall feel proud that yours is the strong hand that protects them from demoniacal hindrances, and such are the men that call you Guardian and Protector "

The King thereupon made polite enquiries about the great sage, and was informed that he was away on a pilgrimage to Somatirtha, on the Gujerat coast, to offer sacrifice to propitiate the gods, thereby hoping to avert the evil destiny that threatened his beloved child Shakuntala

"But," affirmed the hermit, "Your Majesty will be right gladly welcomed by the sage's daughter, who has been commissioned by her father to entertain any guests that might chance to seek his hospitality "

Dushyanta gracefully bowed his thanks

"I thank you for your kind invitation," he replied gravely, "and shall be honoured to partake of the great Saint's hospitality "

Entering his chariot once more, Dushyanta commanded his charioteer to drive deeper into the hermitage Then the King noticed for the first time that scattered upon the ground lay grains of rice, with here and there a slab of polished stone, upon which the fruit of *ingudi* is bruised to extract the oil thereof Vestments made of bark hung upon the branches of the trees to dry, whilst

the gentle domesticated deer roamed peacefully about unafraid at the approach of visitors, the little fawns grazing happily upon the grass lawns. The smoke from burnt oblations and sacrifices curled upward into the sky,—trenches were dug around the roots of trees in order to collect rain-water.

"Charloteer," called the King. "We shall stop here. I do not want to disturb the good people of this grove by driving further in. I shall walk from here."

"As Your Majesty commands," answered the charloteer, drawing in his reins.

Dushyanta alighted, and removing his jewels and ornaments, gave them to his charloteer with his bow and arrow, for it would appear unseemly to enter a penance-grove in the regalia of a king.

"It is wonderfully peaceful here," thought the King, as he walked towards the hermitage. "But hello! Why is my right arm throbbing so hard? Surely there could be no chance of a romance in *this* place? But perhaps Destiny has a surprise for me up its sleeve?"

As the King thus ruminated with himself, a girl's laughing voice broke in upon his thoughts from behind a clump of trees.

"Hark! What a melodious voice!" exclaimed Dushyanta pleasantly surprised. "If the girl to whom it belongs is half as lovely as she sounds, she must be divine!"

Eagerly Dushyanta advanced in the direction whence came the voice, until he espied three ravishing maidens coming towards him with water-cans in their hands. Quickly he bolted behind a large tree from where he could obtain a vantage view of the graceful creatures, without being himself seen.

"Come this way, dears," said the maiden with the pleasant voice, beckoning to her companions.

"Dear Shakuntala," teased one of the latter in a mock-serious tone. "I think Father Kanwa loves you less than he loves his plants, or he wouldn't allow a delicate darling like yourself to water all his precious trees and flowers."

"My dear Anusaya," replied the lovely-voiced girl addressed as Shakuntala, a creature of rare and fragile beauty,—an exquisite woodland flower that bloomed in glory, unseen by the eyes of men "I do not consider this work a task at all, for I love the trees and flowers as though they were my own sisters"

From behind his tree, Dushyanta gazed fascinatedly at the beautiful maidens, lost in admiration of their simple, rustic charm, offset by the dresses of bark that they wore

"Is it possible?" he exclaimed in wonder, his eyes riveted on the maiden called Shakuntala "Could this goddess—this divinely fair creature,—be in truth the daughter of the saintly Kanwa?—Then I must say, the sage, illustrious though he be, is a fool to bury such a maiden in this forest, and force her to the life of a recluse"

"Anusaya, please loosen my *choli*," begged Shakuntala plaintively "Priyamvada has drawn it so tight that I can hardly breathe!"

"Don't blame me if your bosom is bursting!" exclaimed Priyamvada mischievously

"What a naughty girl you are!" cried Shakuntala, blushing prettily, to the delight and enchantment of her unseen admirer

"Ah," he thought rapturously "What beauty! What glamour!—The simplest garb will set off such loveliness and lend it added lustre—Those coral lips,—how like the rose-bud they are! That entrancing form!—'tis like a poem,—a song,—a sculptured piece of art that radiates the freshness of the dawn!"

"Why, Shakuntala, you haven't forgotten your beloved jasmine, have you?" the voice of Anusaya broke in upon Dushyanta's thoughts

"No, indeed, I could never forget it!" declared Shakuntala "Look! The jasmine and the mango-tree are embracing each other so tenderly The jasmine is like a sweet young bride clinging to her bride-groom and

protector, the mango-tree, don't you think?"

The beauteous Shakuntala gazed lovingly at the jasmine delighted at her own fanciful thinking

"Anusaya," declared Priyamvada with a twinkle in her eye "Do you know what Shakuntala is *really* thinking? She is thinking, wouldn't it be lovely if she were married to a fine fellow, like the jasmine to the mango!"

"Oh, you saucy creature!" cried Shakuntala indignantly

"Ah, beautiful one," thought Dushyanta in whom the flame of love had been kindled at first sight "I would fain marry thee now if thou wouldst but consent! Yet—oh heaven! what caste could she be sprung from? But I must not doubt that she was made for me! My throbbing heart and arm tell me so!—O maiden how charmingly dost thou repulse the bee that worries thee Wilt thou repulse me as charmingly—or yield with sweetness indescribable?"

"Oh, this impertinent bee!" cried Shakuntala in exasperation "It will not leave me alone Help help Anusaya!—Priyamvada!—Save me from this offending insect"

"Why," declared Priyamvada mischievously "How can *we* save you? You should call upon the King—he is the protector of the sacred groves!"

This was an opportunity that was too good to be missed At risk of being recognised, Dushyanta gallantly stepped forward

"Who is it," he declared boldly, "that dares to disturb the gentle maidens of Kanwa's holy grove, while Puru's race still reigns the earth?"

The maidens were too astonished to make answer At last Anusaya gathered her wits about her sufficiently to reply to the gallant stranger

"Kind sir," said she, with a sweet smile "We thank you, but 'twas only a bee that was tryin' to sting our friend Shakuntala here"

"Ah," responded the love-smitten King, unable to take

his eyes off the lovely Shakuntala "The bee knows where the honey lies! Indeed how could it resist such concentrated sweetness?"

Shakuntala blushed crimson and cast her eyes down in confusion. Then the King addressed her in a more conventional manner

"I trust," said he "that all goes well at the hermitage and nothing disturbs your sacred rites?"

Shakuntala however merely inclined her head in acknowledgment being too overcome with shyness to answer. Anusaya noting her friend's confusion once more came to the rescue

"Good sir," she replied "we thank you for your kind enquiry, all is, indeed well in the hermitage—Shakuntala dear, go and bring flowers rice and fruits for our honoured guest whilst we wash his feet with this water from our cans"

Dushyanta quickly interceded however refusing to allow Shakuntala to be sent away on any pretext whatsoever. Thanking them profusely for their hospitality he consented to sit down with them under the shade of a *sapta-parna* tree

"O my heart!" thought Shakuntala overpowered by a strange new emotion at sight of the handsome and dashing stranger, which gained in strength and intensity as the minutes went by "What mean these strange feelings within my breast at sight of this stranger? I wonder who could he be, whose manners and appearance are so dignified and regal?"

At that moment, Anusaya voiced her query aloud enquiring politely of the visitor who it was they had the honour of entertaining. The King hesitated a moment before replying, being unable to answer the truth since he wished to retain his incognito as long as possible

"I have been commissioned by the King" he replied at length, "to visit your grove and report to him regarding your sacrifices and holy rites,—whether they are being performed without let or hindrance"

The maidens expressed their deep gratitude for his protection to them all, the conversation turning for a time upon the activities of the hermitage. But Dushyanta's curiosity regarding Shakuntala's caste and parentage could not be held any longer. He enquired of her friends how it was that the sage Kanwa came to have a daughter when his austere living was well-known to all.

"Nay sir," replied Anusaya. "The sage is not her real father, but her foster-father, who adopted her when she was deserted by her mother, as an infant."

"Deserted by her mother!" exclaimed Dushyanta, astonished. "Who was she? And who was her real father?"

"The royal sage Vīswamitra, whose second name is Kausika, was her sire, whilst her mother was the nymph Menaka, despatched by the gods to interrupt the saint's austerities," explained Anusaya.

Dushyanta breathed a sigh of relief to hear that the maiden belonged to the regal caste, being thus eligible for marriage to a king.

"Ah," he declared. "Now it becomes clear how she comes to be possessed of such divine charms!"

Once more the sensitive Shakuntala blushed to the roots of her hair.

"Is the maiden then bound to observe a solitary life, — to dwell forever with her pet fawns, who look at her with such adoring eyes?" pursued the King, his heart standing still to know the answer.

"Oh no, sir," quick came Priyamvada's reply. "Although she has passed her life in religious duties, living in complete obedience to her saintly father's will, she will one day be married to a man who is worthy of her."

Dushyanta's heart missed a leap, for now the unapproachable and unattainable Shakuntala seemed a little more within his reach. Meanwhile the subject of all this consuming interest and controversy grew hot and cold by turns, and soon rose to leave, excusing herself

on some pretext or another Involuntarily Dushyanta's hand went up to check her departure

"Shakuntala, dear," begged Priyamvada "Please do not go away It would appear unseemly and churlish before our guest Besides," she added in a louder tone, "you have not finished watering the shrubs yet You shall not go till you have done so"

Seeing the maiden's discomfiture Dushyanta gallantly came to the rescue, pleading that she be spared the trouble

"The maiden is already over-tired by the exertion of watering so many plants," he said, with a tender glance towards the lovely Shakuntala "Her delicate frame would not be able to stand the fatigue any more Pray let her be spared the trouble Allow me," added the King smilingly, "to discharge her debt for her by presenting you with this ring"

Pulling out a valuable ring from his finger Dushyanta offered it to Priyamvada The maidens startled to see the name of "Dushyanta" upon the seal, looked at each other in quick surprise

"'Twas given to me by the King," said Dushyanta hurriedly, trying to cover up his blunder

"Oh," rejoined Priyamvada "Then all the more reason you should not part with it!—Shakuntala shall be exempted from her duty at your request Shakuntala dear," she added smiling "You are free to retire, thanks to our noble guest's eloquent pleas on your behalf"

But before Shakuntala could take a step, there was a sudden shout in the grove, followed by a wild stampede and much commotion, for a wild elephant belonging to Dushyanta's train had run amok among the gentle deer, causing terror among the inmates of the grove, and raising clouds of dust A cry of "Hermits, protect your animals,—King Dushyanta is near at hand, hunting!" went up in the air

"Oh, fie upon it!" muttered the King, under his breath "Those fool attendants of mine are out searching for

me and making this unholy row in a sacred place like this!"

The three young girls looked at each other in fear and perplexity, and hurriedly excused themselves to their guest.

"Gentle maidens" declared the King earnestly "It shall be my responsibility to see that no one is hurt in this hermitage."

"Anusaya Anusaya my dress is caught in this tree please wait for me!" called Shakuntala lingering in the bower to cast surreptitious glances at the King who returned her shy looks with unconcealed ardour in his eyes.

"Oh, Shakuntala Shakuntala!" thought the King after they had gone "Thou hast taken hold of my heart completely! I cannot tear myself away from this place now. I must encamp my entourage in the neighbourhood, and return here without delay!"

CHAPTER II

IN A CORNER of the forest, not far from the hermitage of sage Kanwa there sat a man upon a log of wood with his head in his hands, his whole body a picture of despair and dejection.

"Oh, what a luckless fellow am I," he moaned "to be forever dancing attendance upon the King's whims and fancies! All day long there's no topic of conversation but 'hunt that tiger', 'shoot this bear' or 'trap the deer', and wandering from jungle to jungle in a wild goose-chase till I'm thoroughly browned off."

"And now to top it all the King has gone and espied a ravishing beauty in the hermitage and refuses to budge from here! On what a life!"

Thus Matharya, the King's jester and friend continued to grumble to himself until he was persuaded that he

was an extremely ill-used man, on the verge of a complete physical collapse. At last he saw the King coming towards him, and at once assumed an attitude of such abject misery and pain as would have melted a heart of stone. The King, however, was too preoccupied with his own passion to notice the jester's tragic demeanour. "Ah!" sighed the love-sick monarch. "She loves me,—she loves me not! The eternal question that plagues the minds of lovers. But methinks she does. For although she was silent and averted her gaze, yet her eyes were drawn towards me in spite of herself. Of course she is not a woman to be easily conquered. But her lingering mien,—did it not betray a sign of love?—Alas! that is how lovers ever delude themselves ascribing to the loved ones the emotions that they feel within their own breasts!"

Mortified that the King had failed to notice him, and determined not to be outdone in misery, the attitudinizing Mathavya made one more bid to force the King's attention.

"Ah, friend," he cried, in a tone that implied the most excruciating pain. "I fear I cannot rise or salute you, or I am unable to move my limbs."

"What!" ejaculated the King. "Since when have you become paralysed?"

"Ah, you may well ask,—you who are the cause of my crippled body!" exclaimed the jester reproachfully.

"I? What are you talking about? Pray be more explicit," answered the King in surprise.

"Why," declared Mathavya, "I am forced to lead a dog's life in this God-forsaken hole, running a wild goose-chase with you and your wild animals, until all my bones are aching and out of joint!"

"Well," thought Dushyanta, chuckling inwardly. "This yellow little realises how far from the chase is my mind at the moment."

"Of course," grumbled Mathavya, "I may as well talk to the wall as request you to give up the hunt. I haven't

had a day's respite since you started out on the expedition "

"As a matter of fact " answered Dushyanta with a smile "I was just thinking of acceding to your request "

"You were? " exclaimed Mathavya joyfully regaining the use of his limbs at once With a whoop of delight he bounded off in the direction of the camp

"Wait a moment!" called the King "I have something to tell you "

"Well " asked Mathavya yawning "What is it? "

"There is a little matter in which I shall be needing your assistance, after you have rested," answered the King

"What matter?" asked Mathavya his curiosity aroused

"I shall tell you by and by," said the King

"Why not now?" insisted the jester

"Well," began the King "I think I may safely assume that you have never yet laid eyes on anything that was really worth seeing!"

"Oh!" groaned the jester "Shakuntala again!"

"Yes," repeated the King "You have not seen the loveliest thing in creation until you have seen the beautiful Shakuntala "

"So I have heard umpteen times already "However," observed the Brahmin, hoping to scotch the romance in the bud, "since you cannot marry a hermit's daughter and any hanky-panky business would be out of the question in a holy of holies like this you'd best put her out of your mind, and come home at once "

"My dear friend Dushyanta would not dream of having an illicit affair with any woman," declared the King "The maiden is the child of the great royal sage Viswamitra and the heavenly nymph Menaka The sage Kanwa is her foster-father "

"Oh-ho!" exclaimed the Brahmin shrewdly "So you know all about her family-tree, do you?—I must say you are an odd fellow to be hankering after a country woman when the most beautiful dames in the world are ready

eat out of your hand "

"Ah, wait till you see her!" exclaimed the King ecstatically "Picture to yourself a form of peerless perfection, transcending all the loveliest things in creation,—a vision of everything fair and beautiful and ideal fit to appetise the gods,—and you have her divine shape moulded into our imagination,—if you have one, of course!"

"Well, she sounds like a proper peach," conceded the jester

"She is indeed a matchless maid," sighed Dushyanta "A flower whose fragrance remains still undiffused,—tender blossom unplucked by profane hands I wonder who is the fortunate man destined to wed her?"

"Why, hurry then, and save her from the arms of some ready ascetic who will scarcely be able to appreciate her charms "

"Ah," sighed the King "That's easier said than done! Her father is away from home, and the maiden is unused to having suitors paying her court "

"But do you think she returns your affection?" asked Jathavya

"I wish I knew!" exclaimed the King "However, I have some hope, for she betrayed some signs of liking me But she was very retiring and reserved, too!"

"Well, my dear friend, you did not expect her to jump into your lap the first time you met her, did you?" said the jester, chuckling "Well," he added resignedly "I hope you have a goodly stock of provisions laid by, for it is clear you intend to make this hermitage your hunting-ground for some time to come, and will be prowling about in it, in quest of romantic quarry "

Dushyanta, however, was lost in a reverie, and gazed about him abstractedly At last he spoke

"My dear friend," said he "I have a problem for you to solve Most of the hermits recognise me by now, therefore I am at a loss to know on what pretext to go to the hermitage, to see the lovely Shakuntala again "

"Well, say—say you have come to collect the sixth part

of their grain as tax "

"Nay, my scatter-brained friend " retorted the King laughing "Holy men don't pay the same tribute as ordinary mortals "

At that moment the King's warder entered from behind a clump of trees to announce the arrival of two hermits from Kanwa's grove

"Victory be yours, great King," said the ascetics bowing before Dushyanta "We beg to request a great favour of Your Most Puissant Majesty, on behalf of the inhabitants of this grove "

"Pray, what is your desire?" asked Dushyanta graciously, delighted to see the hermits, for he envisioned in their visit a ray of hope for his own love-suit

"For the past few days" explained the hermits "demons have been disturbing our rites and harassing us in various ways, taking advantage of our Superior's absence from the hermitage We would, therefore, request Your Majesty to abide in our grove for some time, until the *Rakshasas* are completely routed "

"I am deeply honoured by your invitation and shall be glad to be of service to the saintly inhabitants of your hermitage," answered Dushyanta, secretly rejoicing at the unexpected turn of events in his favour

"Well," chuckled the irrepressible Mathavya after the hermits had departed "A most convenient and timely invitation I must say Your Majesty must be eternally grateful to the demons for furthering your suit in this obliging fashion!"

"My dear fellow," cried the King, "are you not dying to see Shakuntala?"

"Not any more I am afraid, with those demons hovering all around me," answered Mathavya

"Oh never fear, they will not dare to hurt you while I am here," rejoined the King cheerfully "Palvati! Palvati!" he called aloud to his warder "Tell the charioter to come round at once with the chariot and bow and arrow "

"Very well, sire," replied the warder

As the King and Mathavya were about to be driven away to the hermitage, a messenger arrived from the capital, with a message from the Queen-mother

"A message from my mother?" queried the King in concern "Is she not well?"

"Her Majesty the Queen-mother is well, sire, and sends you her regards," answered the messenger "She requests your Majesty to be present on the occasion of a religious ceremony she is having for Your Majesty, in four days' time"

"In four days' time!" exclaimed Dushyanta in dismay "That certainly puts me in a tight spot Here am I pledged to help these holy men, and Mother wants me to be present in town What do you suggest I should do, Mathavya?"

"I suggest you take up a position half-way between these two places, like King Trisanku, since you can't be present in both at once," observed Mathavya waggishly "Then an idea struck the King

"I have it!" he exclaimed "Mathavya, you shall take my place with the Queen-Mother! We have been friends since childhood, and my mother has always accepted you as a son Be a sport, and tell her that I am irrevocably pledged to help these holy men, and that I have commissioned you to represent me by proxy at the religious ceremony she is having"

Needless to say, the suggestion suited Mathavya exactly

"What ho!" he cried with a whoop of joy, delighted at the prospect of returning home at last "So I shall be King for a day! But don't imagine for a moment that I was really afraid of those idiot demons!"

"Oh, no, of course not! You are much too brave a Brahmin for that," laughed the King

"Am I going to travel to the capital in state?" asked Mathavya gleefully

"Oh, certainly!" smiled the King "With the greatest

of pleasure You shall take my entire retinue with me I shall be glad to get rid of it, so that there may be no more disturbance here "

"And you can woo your Shakuntala in peace else laughed the jester

At mention of the maiden's name, Dushyanta's face became serious, for he feared his feather-brained friend would divulge his secret to the ladies of the court

"I must think of a subterfuge to put him off the scent," thought Dushyanta "By the way Mathavya," he remarked casually "I hope you didn't take my flirtation with the wench Shakuntala too seriously It was just a holiday romance,—nothing more After all I am a king, and she a country maid It wouldn't work out would it?"

"Well, so you've seen reason, after all? But don't worry I'll not breathe a word to anyone at the palace I knew from the beginning it was just moonshine and hay fever "

And so to all intents and purposes, the Shakuntala affair was closed for ever

CHAPTER III

THE SEED OF passion, however, had been well and truly laid in Dushyanta's vulnerable heart His love grew in force and intensity as day succeeded day, whilst his torment increased in proportion as his passion became stronger Daily he sought a glimpse of Shakuntala among the trees,—wandering about like a ghost that refused to be laid, pale and hungry-looking, worn out by passion and pining

"Ah me!" sighed the pensive lover "Methinks, the holy sage has cast a spell over his daughter that she may remain secure and invulnerable against the onslaught of love!—But the tide of my passion will not be stemmed

waxes ever fiercer and stronger within my breast O
ama, god of love, have pity upon me! Dost thou not
ark the anguish of my soul—thou who hast inflamed
y heart with shafts of smouldering fire and molten
eel, instead of the flowery arrows thou dost discharge
t other men?—I must see her again—soul of my soul
Shakuntala!"

Rambling and distracted the dejected King wandered
ither and thither about the forest in search of his love
ntill at last he came upon foot-steps traced in the
ingle path Eagerly he followed them and was reward-
id, when, peeping through the trees he gazed upon the
Shakuntala reclining upon a flower-strewn bed-rock,
with her companions hovering over her

"Shakuntala, dearest are you feeling better now?"
sked Anusaya, fanning her friend 'Does the breeze
efresh you?"

"My dear friends," answered Shakuntala in a weak
oice, "please do not worry about me I shall be better
resently"

"My darling is ill!" thought Dushyanta his heart torn
ith tenderness and pity as he gazed upon the pale wan
ice and helpless form of his beloved "Can it be she
in a fever due to the great heat, or—could it be?—the
ver of love is consuming her delicate frame even as it
tormenting me night and day?"

Transported with joy at the thought, Dushyanta
clutched at it as a dying man at a straw

"Anusaya," said Priyamvada in an undertone to her
riend "Have you not noticed that Shakuntala's illness
tarted from the day she met the King? Don't you think
ere might be a connection between the two events?"

"Yes," answered Anusaya, looking very worldly-wise
The thought has certainly struck me too Do you think
he would confide to us if we tackled her about it?"

"Let us try, anyway,"

"Shakuntala dear," said Anusaya in a loud tone to the
leeping girl "Will you not tell your friends what is

really the matter with you?—It seems to us your condition is in every respect similar to that of lovers in books that we have read ”

A slight colour filled Shakuntala's pale cheeks at these words, which likewise sent the blood rushing to Dushyanta's heart, as he stood waiting tensely for the maiden's answer

“O my heart!” he thought anxiously “Art thou about to find confirmation from hers?”

Shakuntala's instinctive modesty made her reticent to reveal her heart's secret, but on being pressed by her friends, she finally confessed to her love for the King. Dushyanta's joy on hearing the words from his beloved's lips can hardly be described. He scaled heights of glory and rapture undreamt of, his spirit soaring to the rarefied atmosphere of magic enchantment known only to those that have trod the path of true love

“At last,” breathed the enraptured lover, “her own sweet lips have told me what I longed to hear! Dear love, thou didst light the flame in my heart,—and now thou dost allay its burning fever!”

“Dear friends,” said Shakuntala plaintively “Now that you know my secret I must tell you all. I love my beloved so deeply that I think I shall die without him!—I do not know love was like this,—so wonderful, so ecstatic yet so hard and cruel and tormenting when impossible of fulfilment!—Oh, how hopeless is my love for a great King!”

“Ah, rapture! 'Tis enough. Must I hesitate longer?—Beloved, If thou didst know how passionately thy Dushyanta loves thee!” thought the King joyfully

Meanwhile Anusaya and Priyamvada put their heads together in the manner of experienced matchmakers.

“I think,” observed Priyamvada solemnly, “that dear Shakuntala's state of collapse is very serious, and calls for immediate action on our part. It is clear she is in a very advanced stage of love, and will not long be able to stand the suspense of separation. Of course, her

choice being a great King like Dushyanta, a scion of Puru's glorious race, we can without hesitation give our blessing to the match'

"Oh, certainly, I am of the same opinion," declared Anusaya "Now we shall have to think of a way to fulfil her heart's desire as quickly as possible"

"Of course," remarked Priyamvada in an assured tone of voice "There is no doubt at all that the King is madly in love with Shakuntala"

"Do you really think so?" asked Anusaya eagerly

"I am absolutely certain about it," returned Priyamvada "Don't you remember the look in his eyes when he gazed at her, and the way he hovers about the grove, haunting it like a ghost, with hollow cheeks and dark rings under his eyes, caused by sleepless nights spent in thinking of her?"

"Shrewd maid," thought Dushyanta, smiling "Thou hast diagnosed my malady to a symptom"

"Let us think of a way to bring them together quickly," continued Priyamvada thoughtfully For a few minutes, silence prevailed in the harbour Then Priyamvada gave a squeal of enlightenment

"I know!" she exclaimed breathlessly "Shakuntala must write a love-letter to the King, which we must contrive to hide in a flower, and place in his path"

"What a lovely idea!" cried Anusaya admiringly "Shakuntala dear, don't you think so?"

"Oh, dear!" protested Shakuntala "Don't you think it might seem too forward?"

"No, no!" answered Priyamvada decisively "You must compose a charming verse which will convey your feelings in a delicate manner"

"But suppose he scorns the letter? What then?" asked Shakuntala in an agony of suspense

"O dearest love!" exclaimed the King mutely "Dost thou not know thy love would die for thee?"

Finally, prevailed upon by her friends, Shakuntala wrote her billet-doux upon a lotus-leaf, carving out the

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Finally, prevailed upon by her friends, Shakuntala wrote her billet-doux upon a lotus-leaf, carving out the

letters with her nail When it was completed, she read it aloud to her friends, her voice shaking with emotion.

"The secret of thy heart is unknown to me,

"O love of my life, my soul, my all!

"By night and by day I passion for thee,—

"Yet King art thou,—and glorious withal,—

"And rustic maiden I!

"I tremble,—I sigh!

"Great King,—couldst thou love me at all?"

"Flesh and blood can wait no more!" thought Dushyanta, impulsively advancing into the harbour

"Fair maiden," he cried, falling upon his knees before the reclining girl "Love but warms thee with its tender, glowing flame behold how it burns me with its pitiless, consuming fire!"

Trembling and astonished, Shakuntala essayed to arise, but Dushyanta held her back.

"Nay, trouble not thyself to arise, dear maiden, but lie as thou art upon thy fragrant couch," said he "With thy permission, I shall sit here by thy side"

"Great King," said Priyamvada, pleased and excited at this unexpected twist of their plans "Is it not your duty as a king to relieve the suffering of your subjects who are in pain?"

"Most assuredly it is," asserted Dushyanta

"We leave you then to relieve the suffering of our dear Shakuntala, who has been in intense pain and agony ever since she met you," declared Priyamvada boldly So saying, she left the harbour, dragging Anusaya along with her, leaving Shakuntala confused and distressed to find herself alone with the King

"Sweetheart!" cried Dushyanta, trying to comfort her "Do not be distressed I adore thee with every breath in my body!—Let me nurse thee in place of thy friends"

"No, no!" protested Shakuntala, once more trying to rise "It is not meet that you should touch me"

"Fairest one, do not go yet!" begged the impassioned lover "The sun is too hot for thy limbs Stay yet awhile

upon thy fragrant couch See, thy bosom still throbs — thy delicate limbs are faint with weariness Thou hast no strength to rise of thine own accord Let me give thee my strength!—Beloved! my own!—Let me restore thee once more to health!"

Though all her heart and soul cried out in response, though her soft exquisite body longed to yield to his passionate caresses, Shakuntala struggled to be free crying "My dearest lord, I beg you, let me go!—I love you with all my heart and soul, but I cannot—I cannot thus yield to you! Remember,—I am a hermit's daughter"

"But my darling," pleaded Dushyanta "Thou shalt transgress no laws of god or man if thou wilt marry me without thy venerable father's consent In heaven the bride is not led to the altar, nor do nuptial ceremonies mark a marriage, but the bride and bridegroom pledge their undying love and fidelity to each other in secret, and are truly married So, too, on earth, such marriages are permitted by law"

"No, no, leave me, I pray you!" beseeched Shakuntala "I shall not leave thee," murmured Dushyanta, "until I have tasted the sweetness of thy lips, as the bee sucks the honey from the blossoming flower" With resistless force, he raised her face to his own, and was about to press the rose-bud mouth, when voices rang out among the trees, interrupting the lover's idyll

"The love birds fated to part every night, must bid sad farewell to each other, for evening shadows fall," intoned a voice prophetically referring, of course, to the loving *chakravaka* birds, destined to dwell apart when night descends

"'Tis mother Gautami!" breathed Shakuntala fearfully "Quick! — Leave me at once!"

Dushyanta cursed under his breath as he beat a hasty retreat behind the trees, at the very moment that old Gautami with her companions entered the arbour.

"My dear child, how are you feeling to-day?" asked

the old woman, hovering solicitously over the sick girl. "Has the fever departed yet?"

"Yes, mother," truthfully answered the girl "I — I am a little better today"

"Tut! Tut! Thy cheek still burns with fever, child — Come, it is getting late, we must take you back to the cottage" Gautami thereupon raised the reluctant girl, who would fain have lingered a little longer in that cool and sweet-scented bower, the scene of her new-found joy and happiness

After they had departed, Dushyanta returned to the bower, giving himself up to his dreams, till darkness fell around him on all sides. Then a cry arose in the night for the King to come and disperse the evil demons who once more surrounded the sacrificial fire. Mindful of his obligations, Dushyanta rushed to the rescue with his bow and arrow at the ready, until he scattered the evil spirits in all directions

The next day, and in the days that followed the lovers met again in the fragrant bower. Illumined by friendship, sympathy, and understanding, their love grew apace fashioned into a thing of gossamer beauty until it flowered into perfection, culminating in a marriage of two like souls,—a marriage truly made in heaven. Bride and groom plighted their troth in secret, swearing eternal love for each other and so were wedded in true *Gandharva* fashion

For a time, all was sweetness and joy and smiling radiance. Nothing marred the glorious mystery of their life together, except the necessity to observe absolute secrecy and decorum before the inmates of the hermitage. But the honeymoon of unalloyed bliss, was alas! all too brief. It ended in heart-breaking parting and separation,—a separation whose tragic significance neither dreamt of at the time

For there came a day not long after, when the demons that had disturbed the sacrifices of the ascetics were scattered far and wide, the rites of the holy men were

completed, and all was serene and tranquil once more at the hermitage Dushyanta could not with legitimate cause linger any longer within the precincts of that gladsome grove, nor could he take with him his beloved bride, for her father had not yet returned from his pilgrimage

"Beloved!" cried the King "It breaks my heart to leave thee behind, and depart alone It seems as though I leave a part of myself behind in this heavenly arbour where I have known such divine happiness!"

"Dearest my lord, do not distress yourself!" consoled Shakuntala "I shall come to you as soon as my father returns home, and gives me his blessing "

But when the moment of farewell had come, the tearful bride of a few days clung pathetically to her husband, begging him not to forget her

"I fear," she sobbed, "that you will forget me when you return to the beautiful ladies of the palace "

"Sweet, say not so!" cried the King, "Banish from thy mind the thought that any other could ever take thy place in my heart Though many lovely women grace my palace, thou reignest supreme in my heart, and I am thine alone "

Shakuntala was a little mollified at these words, but many doubts and fears still assailed her heart

"I wonder when I shall see my dear lord again?" she asked plaintively Tenderly her husband took her fair hand in his, and placed upon her third finger a jewel-encrusted ring with the royal insignia and his name engraved upon it

"Dearly beloved," said the King "Repeat one letter of the name engraved on this ring every night, and before thou shalt have completed the tale of syllables, I shall send my minister to bring thee in honour and glory to my capital "

ONE MORNING, about a week after Dushyanta had departed from the hermitage, Shakuntala sat dreamingly upon the door-step of her cottage, her thoughts far from her surroundings, when lo! there arrived a dread visitor upon the scene, seeking hospitality of Kanwa's daughter

It was the great sage Durvasas, universally known and feared for his irascibility, and the freedom with which he distributed curses and imprecations upon all who incurred his displeasure, whose number was legion. When Durvasas found that the maiden took little notice of his presence, he became livid with rage

"Ho, there, maiden!" he cried, outraged "Dost thou not see me standing before thee? Am I to be slighted like this?—Am I to stand here uninvited and unwelcomed, because thou art lost in thoughts of love?—Curse thee for this insult!—The one thou thinkest of, shall forget thee henceforth, nor remember thy countenance any longer "

Still the dreaming girl paid no heed, but was lost in a reverie of her own. Fortunately, her companions, plucking flowers in a bush near by, heard the terrible words of doom, and saw the sage walking away from the hermitage in high dudgeon, his body shaking with anger

"Oh, horror!" exclaimed Anusaya, when the full implication of the pronouncement penetrated her consciousness. "It is the sage Durvasas, whom poor Shakuntala has annoyed by her negligence—Quick, run after him, and bring him back, Priyamvada!"

Priyamvada soon caught up with him, and begged him to return, propitiating him with offers of drinks and refreshments, in vain she prayed for forgiveness for her friend's absent-mindedness. The sage was adamant—he refused to turn back, or recant his oath

"My words cannot be falsified!" quoth he sternly. Still

Priyamvada pleaded, that since it was her first offence, her friend might be pardoned. At last the sage consented to soften the blow a little.

"Very well," said he grudgingly. "At sight of a token of recognition, the curse shall cease."

So saying, he disappeared from the grove.

Some time after the visit of Durvasas, the venerable Kanwa returned home from his long pilgrimage, to be joyfully received by all his disciples.

There were three people in the grove, however, to whom his home-coming was a source of anxiety and uneasiness. They were Shakuntala and her two companions who were much perturbed in their minds for since his departure from their midst, Shakuntala had received no communication from the King. They were in a quandary, therefore, how to break the news of the secret marriage to Father Kanwa, especially in view of Shakuntala's delicate condition.

Fortunately for them, the guilty maidens were saved the unpleasant task, for the truth was revealed to the sage through supernatural means. The day after the Saint's return, he offered a burnt oblation as a sacrifice, which the officiating priest dropped into the centre of the holy fire, chanting a hymn from the Rigveda. As he did so, a heavenly voice rang out clear and lyrical upon the fragrant, incense-laden air.

"O Sage divine, rejoice to hear

"That in thy daughter's womb there lies

"Great Dushyanta's seed,—a child without peer,

"Whom gods and men alike shall immortalise."

When the saintly Kanwa heard the angel voice announcing the happy tidings of his foster-daughter's marriage to King Dushyanta, his joy knew no bounds. Hastening to his cottage to embrace Shakuntala, he blessed her fondly, bidding her prepare herself for the journey to the capital, for he proposed that very day to send her to her husband's home, escorted by two of his most trusted disciples, and chaperoned by the matron

Gautami

"Thou shalt soon be in thy husband's home, my child" said the sage "I suppose thou shalt need a bridal wardrobe but I fear our hermitage will yield only simple garments of bark!" he added ruefully "No matter,—thy husband loves thee as thou art, my child clad in thine own pristine beauty"

The glad news of Shakuntala's marriage with the King soon spread like wildfire in the grove, causing great excitement among its inhabitants. It was indeed the most sensational event recorded in hermitage history. Drove after drove of saints, hermits, disciples, elderly matrons and young girls flocked to the cottage of Saint Kanwa, offering their congratulations whilst showering auspicious rice upon the blushing bride. Many of them came loaded with such simple wedding-gifts as an austere hermitage would allow. Offerings of fruits, flowers, pickles, jams, sweets, ointments, baskets, clay figures of gods and goddesses, crowded the floor of the Saint's cottage.

The women buzzed around the bewildered bride, offering her advice on marriage. When the well-wishers had departed, Shakuntala embraced her childhood friends, Anusaya and Priyamvada, who had brought with them fresh lotus blooms, and garlands of sweet-scented *Kesara* flowers, with which to decorate the bride.

"Dear, dear friends," cried Shakuntala "You have been so good and kind to me always. How shall I ever abide to be parted from you? You must both come and stay with me at court—I shall ask my father to arrange to send you. Oh, say that you will come!" Overcome with emotion, the young bride dissolved into tears, in which her companions heartily joined her. After a few minutes of liquid emotion, however, they had recovered sufficiently to begin with enthusiasm the details of the bridal toilet, so dear to the hearts of all women everywhere.

"First we must rub your limbs with scented ointment" said Anusaya, producing a box of perfumed ointment made of the Ingudi fruit and sweet-smelling grass leaves.

"Oh, look!" exclaimed the maidens "How well this white lily sets off your lovely profile!" or "How wondrously your white bosom gleams beneath the *Kesara* garlands!" They cried out in delight and admiration as they beheld the beauteous bride decked in the simple ornaments of nature that were all that their loving hands could produce. But when they looked at the vestments of bark, their hearts were saddened.

"On, dear!" they cried ruefully "What a pity we have no fine raiment fit for a queen!"

No sooner was the wish expressed than two hermits appeared, their arms full of ravishing clothes and costly jewels. There were squeals of delight as the maidens fell upon them, followed by exclamations of amazement and ecstasy.

"But Narada, where did they come from?" squeaked Priyamvada excitedly.

"Did the King send them?" questioned Anusaya eagerly.

"A miracle has happened!" exclaimed the hermits. "Heaven itself has showered these rich gifts for our faintly Kanwa's daughter. We were collecting flowers for Shakuntala at the request of our Master, when we suddenly discovered hanging from the branch of a tree his silver robe, sparkling and white as a moon-beam,—a mystic symbol of bridal purity and joy. Suspended from another tree nearby we found these silks, and these priceless gems, as though by the touch of a fairy hand the flowers had been transformed into glittering jewels of rare beauty."

"Oh, it is all like a beautiful dream!" gasped Priyamvada, clapping her hands.

"How lucky you are, Shakuntala!" exclaimed Anusaya. "Just think,—your wedding dress and jewels were actually made in Heaven."

"Come," said the hermit Narada. "Let us hasten to inform Father Kanwa of what has transpired today by dint of his spiritual powers."

Then Shakuntala's friends began anew the task arraying the bride in the splendid celestial raiment and sparkling jewels that lent radiance and lustre to her classic beauty

"Shakuntala, dear, you look every inch a queen!" cried the girls admiringly

"My dear friends I must thank you for all your trouble and pains" answered Shakuntala gratefully

"Not at all," rejoined Priyamvada gaily "After all it isn't every day we assist at the toilet of a Queen"

Father Kanwa presently came in, having been apprised of the miracle of the clothes and jewels. His sombre eyes were gladdened at sight of his beauteous daughter clad in her heaven-sent finery looking unbelievably queenly and dignified. Mixed with joy, however, was a tinge of sadness in the Saint's ascetic heart

"Ah!" he thought pensively "This day must I part with my dearly-beloved child my little nursling that I have fathered for so many long years—But yesterday she seems she was a toddler playing at my feet—Now see her standing there in heavenly attire,—a Queen!"

"My child," said Kanwa in a deep voice "May thou be happy and honoured by thy lord May thou be adored by him, and bear him an illustrious son!" The tremulous maiden received the benediction with tears in her eyes. The sage then led her to the sacred fire bidding her walk round it reverentially, whilst he chanted a holy prayer

"Oh flame that shines upon hallowed air,

"Oh flame that wafts upward upon wings of a prayer—

"Hear, oh hear, the prayer of my heart,

"Purify my child, who this day from hence must depart"

After he had earnestly prayed, Kanwa called to him his trusted disciples, Sarangarava and Saradwata instructing them to accompany Shakuntala on her long journey to Hastinapur, chaperoned by the matron Gau-

Soon the little party moved off, escorted for part

of the way by the heart-broken father and the two childhood companions of the bride, all of whom heard, to their great astonishment, supernatural voices bidding happiness and god-speed to the departing maiden

"Farewell thee well, O maiden of dreams," (they sang),

"May thy path ever lie 'mong lotus-laden streams,

"Where the spreading trees their shades do yield,

"To protect thine eyes, thine limbs to shield

"From burning rays of great Surya's fire

"May gentle zephyrs spur thy heart's desire,

"O maiden of light,

"With spirit so bright,—

"As blithely thou journey through the magic hours,

"Treading on air o'er a carpet of flowers,

"To meet thy lord 'pon Hastinapur's fair towers "

"Child, hear!" cried Gautami, over-awed "The nymphs of the forest who love thee like a sister, are bidding thee a fond farewell "

"Yes, mother," whispered Shakuntala, deeply touched and thrilled Silently she bowed her thanks to the invisible creatures

"Dearest friends," said Shakuntala, with a sigh "Although I long to see my beloved again, my feet will not willingly leave this dear grove where I've been happy all my life "

"Dear Shakuntala," rejoined Anusaya "Parting is always difficult and full of sadness See, this whole grove is stricken with sorrow "

"Father," said Shakuntala pleadingly "Please allow me to see my pet plant, the jasmine, before I go "

"Yes, yes, child, go and bid adieu to thy favourite I know thou lovest it like a sister," answered the sage

"Even as this lovely plant clings fondly round the mango-tree, so shalt thou, dear one, cling lovingly about the neck of thy worthy lord, whom thou hast won by thine own peerlessness and merits—Leave thy dear jasmine to its protector, even as I commit thee to thine "

"Dear sisters," said Shakuntala tearfully "To your

care I leave my jasmine as a memento Do you tend it as I have done, when I am gone "

"And to whose care do you leave us?" asked the maidens, bursting into tears

But Kanwa reproached them for their weakness, asking them to be of good cheer, so that they might be able to comfort their sister who needed their support The little party then moved on in melancholy silence for a while Suddenly Shakuntala gave a smothered cry as she espied her pet deer grazing on the hermitage lawns

"Oh, my pet!" she exclaimed "She is soon to fawn on Father, do not fail to send me word when she does so "

"I will remember," replied the Sage

"But what is this that is tugging at my dress?" asked Shakuntala

"Why, it is thy foster-child that thou didst rear from its infancy, when it was left an orphan, poor little creature," recollected Kanwa "Remembering thy tenderness and loving care, it wants to follow thee child"

"My poor little one, wilt thou follow a miserable wretch who deserts thee so thoughtlessly?" cried Shakuntala weeping anew "Father, I entreat you, look after the little orphan as if it were your own child!"

"My child, dry thy tears Be firm and resolved to meet life's ups and downs as they come," admonished the sage gently

At last they arrived at the border of a lake, where Sarangarava halted the party

"Venerable Master," quoth he "It is written in the sacred books 'Thou shalt accompany thy friend no further than the rim of the first water' We have arrived at the lake, therefore it is time we parted company"

"So be it!" answered Kanwa resignedly "Suffer us to stand under the shade of this tree for a minute, while I tell you the gist of the message to be delivered to the king Tell him, after you have led Shakuntala to his palace, that Kanwa has sent him one whom he is in love and duty bound to cherish as his wife,—to

enthroned as his queen,—because of the pure and natural love that sprang up in secret between him and Shakuntala”

“It shall be according to your wish, Master,” answered Sarangarava, bowing

“My child,” continued the sage, turning to his daughter “A few words of advice to thee In thy lord’s house, be respectful to thy elders, and honour them Be not jealous of those that share thy husband’s love, but be a friend to them rather Always be submissive and gentle to thy lord, even though he treat thee harshly To those that are under thee, be ever kind and considerate If fortune smile upon thee, let it not turn thy head—If thou shalt diligently follow my advice, thou shalt be a great blessing to thy husband and to all his house—And now, dear child, we must part”

“But father,” cried Shakuntala tremulously “Do Priyamvada and Anusaya have to return with thee? Can they not accompany me?”

“Dear child,” answered Kanwa “I fear they cannot accompany thee to such a big city They are innocent maidens, whom it would not be proper to expose to the temptations of a palace”

“O my father,” exclaimed Shakuntala “Torn from thy bosom like a leaf from a tree, how shall I bear life in a new and unknown soil?”

“Thy fears are imaginary, child,” consoled Kanwa “Thou shalt soon be in the bosom of thy lord’s life, reigning in his heart and home as his loved wife and queen Thy child, too, will bring thee endless joy and delight, lightening thy soul, and making thee forget this little grief of parting”

At last, calling forth all her resolution, Shakuntala tore herself away from her father’s embrace, and kneeling at his feet, bathed them with her tears The latter lifted her up, still weeping, from the ground Whilst bidding farewell to her for the last time, Anusaya and Priyamvada reminded Shakuntala to be sure to show to

the King the signet-ring he had given her. The latter paled at the mere suggestion that her husband might perchance, be slow in remembering her. Was it intuition? Was it premonition? Who can tell?

"Come, lady, we must hasten," interposed Sarangarava. "The time is fast passing, and we have a long journey to go."

Wistfully Shakuntala glanced back over her shoulder at the home of her childhood.

"When shall I see this beloved grove again, I wonder?" she mused.

"When thou hast lived a long and happy life with thy lord, and thy son is grown to manhood, and the kingdom devolved upon him by his father, then shalt thou, together with thy husband, seek the calm and repose of thy old home," stated the sage.

"Come, my child," pressed Gautami. "Linger no more. Let thy father return home now. Holy Father, return homewards, or we shall never be done with leave-taking."

"My child," sighed Kanwa. "Do not keep me longer. I must return to my rites without delay."

"Dearest father" entreated Shakuntala. "You are so much weakened by your religious penances. Pray, do not grieve for me too much."

The sage sighed deeply as he gazed for the last time upon the flower-like face of his foster-child, upturned to his own old and wrinkled one.

"How shall I not grieve for thee, dear one?" he murmured. "But go!—And may the gods prosper thee!"

Supported by Gautami, Shakuntala was led away from her father's side at last. As the departing party set sail in a tiny boat, Shakuntala turned again and again to wave to her father and her friends, until they turned a bend in the lake, when the majestic trees hid them from

"Farewell!" she whispered, tears blinding her eyes.
 "Farewell, dear home of my childhood days!"

CHAPTER V

1.

UPON A PLEASANT evening in early winter, Dushyanta sat at ease upon a stone bench in the palace court-yard at Hastinapur overlooking a forest of domes and minarets silhouetted against the ancient sky-line

The thought of the bride he had left behind in the hermitage of Saint Kanwa, or of the strong attachment that had sprung up between them intruded itself not at all upon the King's consciousness, as he sat gazing idly before him at the picturesque landscape his friend Mathavya by his side. The remembrance of Shakuntala had, in truth, been completely eradicated from Dushyanta's memory by the force and power of Durvasa's curse

"As I was telling you, Your Majesty," said Mathavya, "about this rogue of a merchant——"

"Hush, Mathavya, I hear sweet music" interrupted the King, as the strains of soft music and sweet singing fell pleasantly upon his ears

"'Tis a charming song, in truth!" agreed Mathavya. "It comes from the music-room, ah, it is the Queen Kansapadika practising a new song"

"How passionately she sings!" declared the King

"Do you not understand the intent of her song?" asked Mathavya, glancing at the King out of the corner of his eye

"I believe I do," answered the King good-humouredly. "She is reproaching me in song for neglecting her a little for the Queen Vasumatī. Will you go and tell her that Dushyanta has heard and understood her gentle reproof?"

"Must I face her jealous fury?" asked Mathavya wryly

"Oh, come, come!" coaxed the King. "You will know how to pacify her with sweet words. Go and give her my message"

"Very well," answered Mathavya resignedly, stalking

off in the direction of the music-room

" 'Tis passing strange," thought Dushyanta when he was alone, "how a fragment of melody, or the fragrance of a flower, will evoke forgotten memories, filling the soul with sadness, as though vague remembrances from other lives are passing over the spirit."

Whilst Dushyanta was thus soliloquising with himself his chamberlain appeared to announce the arrival of a deputation of hermits from the hermitage of Saint Kanwa

"Sire," said the chamberlain "Two hermits and some women from Kanwa's hermitage have just arrived, and seek immediate audience with Your Majesty"

"A deputation from Saint Kanwa's, did you say?" asked Dushyanta wonderingly

"Yes, sire They are anxious to deliver a message from their Superior," continued the chamberlain

"Instruct my domestic priest Somarata to receive them with all honour, and introduce them before me in the Chamber of the Consecrated Fire," commanded the King

Dushyanta then arose to go indoors to prepare himself for the holy visitors When he was seated in the hallowed room, the hermits were ushered into his presence by the chamberlain Preceded by Somarata, the King's priest, Sarangarava and Saradwata entered, followed by Shakuntala and Gautami Although her form was half hidden by a flowing veil, Shakuntala's grace and beauty could not be concealed It drew the eyes of the King and his attendants immediately upon her

"Who can she be?" thought the King "She is indeed wondrously fair and graceful, and quite out of place in this austere company"

Dushyanta inquired of his warder in a low tone what the lady was

"I cannot conjecture her identity, sire," answered the warder

"Most reverent sirs," began Somarata, when the command was within a few feet of the King "Behold the

Guardian and Protector of the Four Orders of the Priesthood He awaits your petition "

The hermits bowed

"We come not as petitioners great Brahmin," smiled Sarangarava "We have the greatest confidence in His Majestys generosity and protection "

At that moment Shakuntala's right eye-lid quivered involuntarily Sick with fear at the evil omen she paled under her veil, her heart beating violently at sight of her dear lord

"O my heart, take courage," she whispered inwardly

"Your Majesty," declared the Kings priest "These holy men have come from the forests bordering the snowy mountains, and wish to deliver a message from their spiritual head the great Rishi Kanwa "

"I am ready to hear it," returned the King

"Glory be to the King!" chorused the disciples of Kanwa

Dushyanta bowed

"My greetings to you, holy men " he responded graciously "I trust your religious rites are undisturbed?"

"Who would dare disturb our rites as long as thou art our protector, great King?" rejoined Sarangarava

"Such indeed is the duty of a King, or it were mockery to hold the title of Defender of the Just," observed Dushyanta "Is the venerable Sage Kanwa in good health? His welfare is of great consequence to the country and the people "

"He is well, by the grace of Brahma, and sends his greetings to Your Majesty He bade us tell Your Majesty that he feels extremely happy to bless Your Majesty's marriage with his daughter Shakuntala," declared Sarangarava "Since Your Majesty is the greatest and noblest of men, and Shakuntala here the very embodiment of virtuous womanhood, it would appear that the great Lord Brahma hath for once united in holy matrimony a bride and bridegroom truly suited to each other "

For a few seconds that seemed like eternity to Sha

tala, complete silence reigned in the fire-chamber At last Dushyanta spoke

"What is this strange thing I hear?" he asked in a low voice, amazement and wonder marking each syllable he uttered

Dushyanta's words were like a knife plunged into Shakuntala's heart She reeled under the shock

"What!" exclaimed Sarangarava "Dost thou hesitate, monarch, to accept thy true and loyal wife, who will soon be the mother of thy child?"

"Are you trying to suggest," demanded the King, more and more mystified, "that I am actually married to this lady?"

"Take heed, King," warned Sarangarava "It is not befitting a monarch to break the rules of justice and morality because he repents his vows Even if thou love her no more, thou must accept her as thy wife, and let her dwell beside thee, for a wife's place is by her lord"

"It is preposterous that I should be so addressed!" exclaimed Dushyanta "All this is pure fabrication!"

"It is obvious, King, that power has intoxicated thy soul," retorted Sarangarava spiritedly "Else thou wouldst not with impunity make a plaything of a holy man's daughter!"

"What! Insult upon insult! This is intolerable!" cried Dushyanta, flushing angrily

Alas! for the luckless Shakuntala —every word that her lord uttered, seared her soul like a flaming iron Trembling and anguished, her heart cried out in silent agony at the injustice of Fate's decree though she stood mute and immobile, a tragic though beautiful figure

At last, old Gautami removed the veil that concealed the lovely face, hoping thus to revive the King's memory Dushyanta gasped when he beheld the exquisite form fully revealed to his gaze He was enchanted with what

w

† rare and wondrous beauty!" he thought looking 'untala with undisguised admiration "Why! It

is mine for the asking'—But I cannot believe she is my wife, (as this hermit alleges), and must therefore restrain myself "

For a long while, Dushyanta sat wrapped in deep thought, fixedly regarding the beauteous girl At last, Sarangarava interrupted his trance-like silence

"Well, King, thou art very silent," he observed "Dost thou not yet recall thy wife, now that thou hast looked upon her face?"

"Holy man," answered Dushyanta gravely "I affirm once more in all truth,—I was never wedded to this lady How, then, can I recall her visage, beautiful though it undoubtedly is?"

"Ah, woe is me!" Involuntarily the words escaped Shakuntala's unhappy lips

"Beware, monarch!" exclaimed Sarangarava "For this day hast thou insulted the holy Sage, who didst bless thy union with his treasured child Rather, he should have damned thee to hell for the base ravisher that thou art!" Sarangarava's anger burst its limits as he hurled the epithet at the King, though Saradwata begged him to restrain himself, whilst he reminded Shakuntala to show the King the signet-ring he had given her

In desperation, Shakuntala wondered what it would avail her to revive his memory, since his feelings for her had undergone so drastic a change She hesitated therefore, to produce the ring

"I will not call thee husband," she began in an agitated voice, "since thou wilt not acknowledge our union Noble son of Puru, it is unworthy of thee to betray an innocent girl who trusted thy word, and pledged her troth to thee forever "

"What vile aspersions are these that thou dost cast upon my fair name, lady?" retorted Dushyanta

"If thy strange conduct is due to a cloud that mysteriously darkens thy memory," at last said Shakuntala, "then this ring, with thy name engraved upon it, will convince thee of the truth of my word " So saying,

Shakuntala raised her left hand towards the King But the next moment she uttered a cry of dismay

"Alas! I've lost my ring!" she cried in anguish "I must have dropped it in Sachi's holy pool!"

The King smiled ironically

"How quickly does a women's mind work," he observed

"Great Prince," interposed Gautami tartly "This maiden was reared in a holy hermitage, and knows not the meaning of deceit"

"Madam," answered the King "The female sex, it is well-known, is born subtle and wily Witness the *koil*, how cleverly she leaves her eggs to be hatched by others"

"Dishonourable wretch!" cried Shakuntala angrily "Judgest thou others by thine own perfidious ways? Thou art indeed unparalleled in falsehood,—a dissimulating masquerader in the name of religion!"

"Well!" thought the King, taken aback by the maiden's sudden fury "That sounded like righteous anger, and no acting! She almost makes me doubt my own mind"

"My dear lady," said the King aloud "The world knows Dushyanta too well to give credence to such wild accusations"

"Fool that I was to trust my honour to a man whose heart is like a reservoir of poison, whilst his lips mouth honeyed words!" exclaimed Shakuntala bitterly

"Regret comes too late in the wake of rash and impulsive actions," declared Sarangarava sternly "A contract like marriage should never be hastily or secretly transacted"

"What! Do you still persist in that trumpery charge?" exclaimed Dushyanta "Is my word to be discredited in favour of hers?"

"That seems absurd indeed, does it not great King?" asked Sarangarava sarcastically "Well has it been said Disregard the innocence of those who from their childhood have never been acquainted with falsehood, but the false words of him who is well versed in

"But my good man, consider What would it avail me betray this lady?" asked Dushyanta, trying to keep his temper in check

"Nothing," retorted Sarangarava "except ruin"

At last Saradwata cut short the argument

"Since we have fulfilled the holy Kanwa's commission there is no more to be said so we had best return home"

And he "There is no doubt at all that the fair Shakuntala is thy bride, King, whether thou wilt it or no," he added, addressing Dushyanta "And since the husband's sway over his wife is absolute we leave it to thee to do with her as thou pleaseth we have done our duty and must depart"

So saying, Saradwata made for the door followed by the others But Shakuntala ran after them imploring them not to desert her The hermits however sternly disregarded her pathetic pleas, but the old woman, who had known the maiden since she was a babe, could scarcely listen to her lamentations in vain She begged them to allow her to return with them Sarangarava, however, was adamant He rebuked Shakuntala for wishing to leave her lord and master

"If thy conscience be clear, and thy soul pure, then must thou be prepared to endure any fate in thy husband's home," he declared "Even though he relegate thee to the rank of a servant, thou must obey implicitly"

"Thou dost grossly deceive the lady hermit," observed the King "As a man of virtue, I cannot take another man's wife"

"Oh," cried Sarangarava "Why this sudden desire to be considered virtuous, when thou hast coolly and conveniently forgotten thy marriage vows?"

Totally non-plussed by the hermit's obduracy, Dushyanta at last turned for advice and counsel to his domestic priest, Somarata

"Most reverend sir," said the King in a low tone "I know not what course of action to follow in this distressing matter I pray you, give me the benefit of your

wisdom and experience I seem to be cornered between two evils to be dubbed a ravisher,—or the deserter of my wedded wife! Both are obnoxious, and involve equal sin and injustice—Yet I know I am innocent! Unless by some strange quirk of destiny, I have forgotten the marriage these hermits say I have contracted ”

For some time the priest pondered over the King's problem. At last he gave his decision.

“Your Majesty were best advised to pursue a middle course of action in this matter,” he declared judiciously. “I suggest that this lady be given shelter and asylum in my own household until her child is born. Then we shall be able to determine without a shadow of doubt whether her claim be just or false ”

“How so?” queried the King, perplexed.

“Your Majesty may recall that soothsayers and astrologers have prophesied that Your Majesty's first-born destined to be a universal ruler. If, then, the Saint's daughter should give birth to a male child who has the discus or mark of empire in the lines of his right hand, then she may unreservedly be received by Your Majesty as his wife. If otherwise, she may be sent back to her father's house ”

“It shall be as you say, sir,” assented the King, relieved.

“Daughter,” said the priest gently. “Come with me.”

Weeping Shakuntala followed him, repeatedly calling upon Mother Earth to open up and swallow her.

Left alone in the fire-chamber, the King sat dazed and silent, the thought of Shakuntala and all that had just transpired absorbing him completely.

“What conspiracy of fate is this,” he thought wonderingly, “that offers me so lovely a creature for the asking yet I dare not accept her!”

Suddenly cries of astonishment were heard without.

“Ha! What now?” thought the King.

Excited exclamations of “Miracle! Miracle!” rent the air, as the priest Somarata burst into the fire-chamber.

hearing sensational news

"Your Majesty," he exclaimed breathlessly "A most astonishing thing has happened! As I was leading away the maid Shakuntala, a luminous shape descended from the skies, and bore her away in it's arms, weeping I have never seen anything like it before in my life!"

The King sighed wearily

"A strange end to a strange episode!" he exclaimed "It is of no use our trying to understand this mystery, my good priest Let us rest"

But though the King tossed and turned in his bed all night there was to be no rest for him The thought of Shakuntala's weeping countenance troubled his consciousness, keeping him awake

"Ye gods!" he muttered to himself "'Tis true I disowned her,—I had to! Yet my heart wants to believe other words, now that she has been snatched from me—cannot remember marrying the beautiful creature,—yet she spoke the truth, there is no doubt about it at all—By heaven, how shall I fathom this mystery?—beautiful Shakuntala, thou art no more upon earth,—and thy child, too, is lost to the world with thee! Could it really be my own child? It must be! Alas! Alas! How grievously have I sinned this day"

On and on ran Dushyanta's fevered mind in this troubled strain, remorse gnawing at his soul like a cancer, robbing him of all sleep and rest

CHAPTER VI

SEVERAL DAYS ELAPSED since the unhappy episode in the chamber of the Consecrated Fire, which had robbed the King of all peace of mind, though his memory remained clear as a fog of forgetfulness

One morning, as the King was attending somewhat mechanically to his state duties, a visitor was announced

and ushered into his presence This was his brother-in-law Mitravasū, the Superintendent of the City Police.

"Well, Mitravasū, what can I do for you?" asked the King

"Your Majesty," began Mitravasū "My men have just caught a fisherman red-handed, as he was attempting to sell a very valuable ring belonging to Your Majesty with your name engraved upon it"

"A ring with my name engraved upon it!" echoed the King, starting up as he remembered Shakuntala's words regarding a ring of that description

"Yes, but it has been found again Here it is," replied Mitravasū And so saying, he held out the ring for the King's inspection Dushyanta uttered a great cry as he recognised the ring he had given to Shakuntala With recognition, remembrance came flooding back into his consciousness with all the force and impact of water running down a steep cataract

"She swore it was lost in Sachi's holy pool!" he exclaimed remorsefully "And I would not believe her"

The King then handed Mitravasū a purse with a handsome sum in it,—the full value of the fateful ring—as a reward to the poor fisherman who had discovered it in the belly of a carp

Great was the King's grief when the realisation of what he had done dawned upon him fully

"Oh Shakuntala, my love, my own dear wife!" he cried hoarsely "Miserable wretch that I was to disown and dishonour thee, sweetest, purest flower of womanhood that thou wert!—Shakuntala, my beloved, come back to me! But no!—I've lost thee for ever,—thou hast forsaken thy faithless lord O cursed destiny, what have you done that I should be punished with so black a fate—

this?—Heaven, be a witness to my sorrow and remorse—do not drag on a miserable existence on earth with me her I love! Send me a quick and merciful death—Brahma!"

Overwhelmed by the sudden onrush of grief that flooded

ed his soul, Dushyanta wept, nor could be consoled

It was Spring, the season of the great vernal festival, when the mango-blossom is in full bloom,—when nature is thronged in gladness, when life bursts forth into greenness and glory, when Kama, the God of Love, sends forth his flowery darts with gay and careless abandon, striking old hearts and young men and maids alike with ardent and fiery passion, when girls deck their tresses with variegated flowers, and sway their jaunty hips with inviting sensuousness

But there was no gay and carefree spirit of spring in Dushyanta's kingdom, nor did nature's smiles find an echo in the hearts of the people. The great annual feast had been called off in view of the King's heavy grief at the loss of his beloved wife, Shakuntala. In desolation, Dushyanta walked his deserted gardens alone, his sorrow enhanced by the piquant beauty of the landscape around.

"Alas! the very season shrieks out the joys of love, but she who was the very embodiment of love is no more in the world!" brooded Dushyanta. "Fain would I drown my sorrow in deep slumber, but sleep hath forsaken my couch,—it no more rests upon my aching lids—Oh, Shakuntala, my love, I heap curses upon myself for having rejected thee so cruelly! Have pity upon thy slave, and return to him!"

As the melancholy monarch wandered about in his loneliness, there was one to whom his grief-stricken outpourings brought intense joy and delight. This was the celestial nymph Sanumati, who invisible to earthly eyes, flitted about among the trees, following the King happy to see to what straits of desperation and suffering he was reduced by his separation from Shakuntala. For Sanumati was the great friend of the heavenly nymph Menaka, the mother of Shakuntala, who had enjoined on her the task of going down to earth to ascertain how Dushyanta fared, for her daughter languished for him even in heaven.

Well satisfied with her mission, assured beyond doubt of the King's great love for Shakuntala, Sanumati flew

back to heaven to report the glad tidings that would bring some cheer to the sad heart of Shakuntala

The morning after Sanumati's espial in the palace gardens Dushyanta sat in a state of utter dejection his spirits sinking to the very nadir of despondency, when he was aroused from his lethargy by a loud cry for help

"Murder! Murder!" shrieked a voice, which Dushyanta recognised with dismay as his friend Mathavya's. Starting up, the King rushed out of the chamber to his friend's rescue

Outside he met Vetravati, the warder

"The Brahmin has been carried away by an evil spirit to one of the towers of the Palace of Clouds, and is in great danger," said the warder urgently

"An evil spirit in my own house!" exclaimed the King "What next?"

Drawing his sword, Dushyanta advanced rapidly up the spiral staircase that led to the tower

"My bow and arrow, quick!" he called down to his minions. Quickly the bow and arrow were brought to him. Stringing it swiftly, Dushyanta aimed it at the invisible presence that was torturing his friend

"Monster!" cried Dushyanta furiously "Dost thou dare to defy me in my own house? Prepare to die!"

Immediately the arrow was shot. Matali the charioteer of Indra stood before the King, whilst Mathavya straightened up, as though suddenly released from the murderous hold that had pinned him to the ground

"It is the wish of the gods that thou shouldst turn thy arrows against the demons," said Matali as he smilingly came forward to greet the King

"Matali!" exclaimed the King, amazed "Welcome, great charioteer of Indra"

"What!" cried Mathavya indignantly "You bid this monster who tried to break my neck a warm welcome?"

Indra hath sent me with a request to you, great one," declared Matali

ay let me hear it," answered Dushyanta

"The descendants of Kalanemi, the giants with a hundred arms and heads, are rearing their many heads against the gods in defiance," explained Matali "Indra, the mighty lord of Heaven, who calls thee friend, has been pleased to nominate thee the leader of his armies against the *Daityas*—Ascend Indra's celestial chariot, therefore, and fly to victory"

"I am flattered by the signal honour paid me by the mighty Indra," replied Dushyanta "But tell me, why did you torture my friend a little while ago?"

"Well," laughed Matali "That needs a bit of explaining But let me first apologise to your good friend for having made him the victim of a little scheme—Seeing that Your Majesty needed to be goaded into action by drastic means, I took the liberty of rousing Your Majesty's ire by this subterfuge, and thus force you into action"

Dushyanta seemed indeed to be transfused with new energy by Matali's clever ruse Gone were the lethargy and spiritlessness of the past few months Rising to his full stature, and filled with his customary confidence, he issued commands in the old tone of authority

"Mathavya," directed the King "Inform my minister Pisuna of what has transpired here to-day, and bid him protect my realm and my people with care and energy whilst Dushyanta's bow is ranged against the enemies of Heaven"

The King then ascended the celestial car, followed by Matali, and was flown heavenwards to wage war against the *Daityas*

CHAPTER VII

DUSHYANTA'S GREAT MIGHT in battle, coupled with his matchless heroism, soon won for the gods victory supreme over the dread *Daityas*, the giant descendants of Kalanemi

Great were the rejoicings in Heaven over Dushyanta's resounding success in war, which was crowned by high honours being heaped upon his head by the grateful gods. Enthroned beside mighty Indra as the hero of the hour, Dushyanta was feted and feasted with great pomp and ceremony, which aroused the envy of all the gods assembled, including Jayanta, the son of Indra.

When the splendid celebrations were ended, and the godly repast over, Dushyanta rose to take his leave of Indra and the other gods.

"Thy stupendous skill and valour in war hath made thee the equal of all the gods present, O great King," declared Indra, placing around Dushyanta's neck a beautiful garland of *mandara* flowers, tinged with sandal, that had lain upon the god's own breast.

"Thou dost do me too much honour, O mighty Indra," murmured Dushyanta overwhelmed. "'Tis by thy power alone that doughty deeds are performed by mortal men."

After the exchange of compliments on both sides Dushyanta departed in the heavenly car of Indra, driven by Matali.

As they glided through the empyreal, star-studded space, Matali drew the King's attention to the sweet singing of the heavenly hosts.

"Hark, the inhabitants of the heavenly spheres sing anthems to your brave deeds, great King," said Matali.

"How melodious is their song!" exclaimed Dushyanta, listening raptly to the ethereal music of the spheres. "And where are we flying now?"

"Just now we are in that orbit of the heavenly sphere called the *Parivaha*," answered Matali.

"How wonderfully calm and reposeful it is here," sighed Dushyanta, drinking in the quiet of the atmosphere that was like balm to his jagged spirit.

"And what is that beautiful mountain range down which flows a shimmering river of gold?" asked the King presently.

"Ah, that is the Golden Peak, the abode of the servants

of Kuvera, the God of Wealth," replied Matali "The highest kind of penances are worked there It is also the home of Indra's great sire, Kasyapa, and his wife, Aditi, who do penance for the sins of mortals"

"I should very much like to pay my respects to the great sage," said Dushyanta eagerly

"Certainly," agreed Matali, gracefully piloting the car down to the Golden Peak

"Kasyapa's grove lies yonder, there where the anchorite stands motionless as a statue" said Matali, after they had descended from the car "If Your Majesty will wait here a minute, I shall go and announce Your Majesty's arrival to Kasyapa"

"How wonderfully bracing this place is!" thought the King, as he waited under the shade of a spreading *asoka* tree "The air is like champagne No wonder the ascetics need no food or drink"

As the King waited, his right arm began to throb violently, to his great surprise

"Mock me not, mine arm," thought Dushyanta bitterly "My dearest hopes of happiness have vanished forever"

At that moment, the King's attention was diverted by the sound of a child's laughter in a thicket close by

"Oh, you naughty boy!" scolded a female voice "How stubborn you are!"

Once more the merry, childish laughter rang out clearly in the clean, crisp air, bringing a smile to Dushyanta's pensive face

The owners of the voices soon came into view, disclosing two female attendants and a young boy of noble bearing, whose fair face and bright eyes were a joy to behold Laughingly the boy teased a young lioness suckling her savage offspring

"Open your mouth!" he cried spiritedly to the angry cub "Let me see how many teeth you have got"

"Leave the animal alone, Sarva-damana," rebuked the nurse severely "You *are* high-spirited, I must say, and certainly live up to the name, 'All-taming' that the

hermits have given you "

The King watched the little by-play with interest and amusement. He was charmed beyond measure by the bright-faced child who displayed such a dauntlessly brave spirit.

"If you stop teasing the animal, I shall give you a lovely toy," coaxed the second attendant, trying to bribe the boy.

"Give it to me first," retorted the boy impudently holding out his hand for the promised gift.

Fascinated Dushyanta stared at the plump little hand for it held in it the mystic mark of empire, the sign of universal dominion.

"Truly he is a most attractive, though wayward child who seems cut out for a very high destiny indeed" thought Dushyanta, gazing at the boy in admiration.

"How blessed are the parents of such a peerless child," sighed the King, thinking wistfully of his own childless state.

"Oh, dear!" cried the nurse helplessly. "Whatever shall we do with this intractable child? He is so wilful. I wonder who can help us reason with him?"

Looking around for help the attendant espied the King standing in a corner of the bush.

"Kind sir," said she. "Do you think you could persuade this rebellious child to let go of the young lion? I fear he may provoke its mother into attacking him."

Smilingly the King came forward to oblige.

"Oh child of a saint," he began. "Dost thou have the temerity to be rebellious here in this sacred grove?"

Surprised the boy looked up at the King, involuntarily releasing his hold on the lion. The nurses were delighted to see this, and signalled to Dushyanta to follow up the advantage by taking him quite out of harm's way. Gently taking the boy's hand in his own whilst engaging him in conversation, Dushyanta led the child a little away from the lion.

An unknown attraction seemed to hold the boy in

thrall, for he became all at once docile and submissive, listening eagerly to King's every word, whilst he gazed up at him with a look of wondering adoration in his dark eyes. The attendants clasped their hands together, and exchanged surprised glances at this sudden transformation in their charge.

"Wonderful!" they breathed in an excess of relief. "Kind sir, we thank you most sincerely. But he is no son of a saint," they added, laughing.

"Indeed?" observed the King, his curiosity roused. "I should not have thought it, certainly from his behaviour and bearing. But whose son is he then, if one may ask?"

"He comes from the family of Puru," conceded the second attendant hesitantly.

"From the family of Puru!" exclaimed the King, startled.

"As a matter of fact," declared the attendant slowly, staring hard at the King, "I think he looks very like yourself, good sir."

"But is this not a sacred grove? How could anyone but a saint live here?" asked Dushyanta, agitated.

"That is so, certainly," admitted the attendant. "But his mother happens to be the daughter of a heavenly nymph," she added.

Dushyanta's pulse beat faster at these words.

"But what is the name of the man she married?" he urged, his voice betraying his excitement.

"The wretch!" exclaimed the nurse indignantly. "I really cannot bring myself to utter the name of one who was callous enough to disown his own wife!"

At that moment a bright peacock passed by.

"Just look at that *shakunta*, *Sarva-damana*!" exclaimed the first attendant to her charge.

"Where? Where? Where is my mother?" asked the boy, looking eagerly around.

"I said *shakunta*, darling, not *Shakuntala*," laughed the nurse. "How he dotes on his mother!"

Dushyanta became deathly pale at mention of the

name Shakuntala He knew then beyond the shadow of a doubt that he was on the trail of his lost beloved at long last,—that his saga of suffering and separation was soon to end

"Child what have you done with your amulet?" The sharp voice of the attendant cut in on the King's disturbed thoughts "I do not see it on your hand!"

"Here it is," said Dushyanta, as his eye fell upon the lost amulet where it lay upon the ground, a little distance away The next moment he stooped and picked it up

"Don't touch it! Don't touch it!" cried the nurses together, throwing up their hands in horror

Dushyanta, however, had already picked it up and placed it on the boy's wrist

"Why, he has touched it,—and without being harmed! Isn't it wonderful?" exclaimed the nurses in tones of amazement, mystifying the King more and more

"But why should it harm me?" asked Dushyanta, perplexed

"Because the amulet holds magic virtue in it," explained the nurses excitedly "It was given to the boy by the mighty son of Marichi, and cannot be touched by anyone except the father or mother of the boy"

"And if it is?" asked the King quickly

"Then it turns into a serpent and attacks him," answered the attendants

"And has such a phenomenon ever occurred?" queried the King

"Countless times," answered the nurses, as they hurried away to break the amazing news to Shakuntala leaving the overjoyed Dushyanta to clasp his son in his arms

After a period of waiting that seemed like eternity to the King, Shakuntala appeared at last, looking pale and emaciated, dressed in widow's weeds, her hair falling behind her in a single braid With sad countenance, in which love and reproach mingled in equal measure she
rded her husband steadily, as Dushyanta, haggard

With remorse and longing, gazed back at her with sorrowful eyes, that mutely pleaded for forgiveness

Sobbing, he fell upon his knees before her, kissing the hem of her garments, and her fair feet

"Oh, my dearly beloved one!" he cried in broken tones "I know I have wronged thee grievously,—but do not disown me as I disowned thee once, miserable cur that I am! Alas! What accursed cloud of forgetfulness darkened my memory I know not, but 'twas so, I swear!——"

Gently Shakuntala raised him up

"My husband, arise," said she "I know 'twas no fault of thine, but mine own sins committed in a previous life, that brought these sufferings upon my head"

"Nay, say not so!" cried Dushyanta passionately "Twas a madness of the soul I suffered from!"

Tenderly the King wiped the tears that shone upon Shakuntala's eyelids

"The lost ring!" exclaimed Shakuntala, a stab of pain passing through her at sight of the ring of recognition

"The lost ring!" echoed Dushyanta sadly "'Twas found by a fisherman in a carp's belly"

"Mother," interrupted the boy "Is this really my father?"

"Yes, darling, this is indeed your father," replied Shakuntala

The three were then united at last Fondly Dushyanta embraced his wife and son, indescribable joy flooding his heart Together they made plans for a glorious future, when having received of Kasyapa and Aditi the benediction they craved, they ascended the car of Indra, and flew back to earth, a song upon their lips and in their hearts

VIKRAMORVASIE
OR
THE HERO AND THE NYMPH

CHAPTER I

IN THE PRIMEVAL DAYS of the world's glory, when the virgin Earth was young and fair and in the springtime of its existence, when nymphs and fairies and *apsaras* delighted in haunting its glens and forests and deep mountain fastnesses, there once arose over the lovely Ilac fields of Pratisthana, in ancient India, a soft, sweet cry of mingled female voices, like the sad and plaintive wail of angels in distress calling for help and succour

"Hark! What sound was that?" exclaimed a handsome, dashing young prince, who came riding up at that moment in a fast-moving chariot, swift as the winds of heaven. He was the peerless Ilia Pururavas, King of the World, grand-son of the Moon, who reigned supreme at Pratisthana

"Help! Help! Alas! Alas!" the lamenting voices continued to broadcast the pathetic appeal over the emerald plains of Pratisthana

"Tis the divine multitude of the heavenly nymphs!" thought Pururavas, springing out of his chariot, and scanning the azure heavens which echoed the cry of sweet supplication. "Alas! What grief could have befallen them to make them cry thus in dire distress?"

He cried out in a thundering voice, gazing upwards for sign of the forms that yet remained invisible to his mortal eyes

"Who cries for help?" he demanded. "Shall a call for help go unanswered when Pururavas, King of the Universe, stands by, ready to defend? Speak, reveal your-

selves!" Involuntarily the young warrior clutched at the hilt of his sword, ready to unsheath it, his face set a grim with determination

As the King spoke, the voices drew nearer, the fair forms gradually taking shape before his eyes, revealing creatures of divine grace and beauty, clad in pastel-hued garments of gossamer delicacy, in shades of sky-pink, azure-blue, sea-green, and dawn-grey. They stood in a cluster around the King, anxiously looking to him for help

"Great King," declared Rambha and Menaka two of the *apsaras* standing nearest to Pururavas. "We beg you rescue our dearest sister and playmate, Urvashi, and Chitrlekha, from the clutches of that fell Titan, Kayash of Hiranyapoor, who has taken them captive whilst they were returning from the celestial Mount Kailasa, laying great ravishing hands upon them, the infamous wretch!"

Fear not, O nymphs of Heaven," answered the King. "I shall bring back your beloved sisters to your arms or die in the attempt."

"O worthy King," replied Rambha, clasping her hand in joy. "We shall await thy victorious return on yonder Peak of Gold."

"Be it so! I shall overtake that defiant and conceited sinner against Heaven, and bring him to book upon his knees!" exclaimed the King, as he climbed into his chariot, exhilarated by the thought of the coming encounter, the glint of battle flashing in his dark eyes.

The multitude of the *apsaras* watched him as he sped away in his magic chariot towards the north-east, like a streak of lightning.

"The King has gone," said Rambha to her companions. "Let us repair with haste to the Peak of Gold, and wait for him there against the appointed time."

So saying, she led the others up a hill near by, whose summit was called the Peak of Gold.

Some time after, as the nymphs were anxiously gazing onwards, tense with excitement, one of them, named

Sahajanya, gave a cry of joy as she spied a speck of white, like a bird, upon the blue horizon, which loomed larger and larger, until they could clearly discern the deer-bannered chariot in which sat three figures

"Look! Look! Sisters, behold!—The chariot of the King!" cried Sahajanya, dancing with delight "The mighty Ilan would not return without our darling Urvasie! Victory to the great King!"

As the swift chariot drew nigh to Pratisthana bringing in it the triumphant King with the lovely nymph, Urvasie, and her bosom friend, Chitralekha, the former felt a powerful emotion sweep over him with irresistible force. Mingled pity and tenderness surged in his breast for the unconscious celestial form beside him which was still faint with terror after the maiden's ordeal at the hands of the Titan Kayshie

"Recall thy reason, O lovely one!" pleaded Pururavas whose heart was captured by the nymph's inexpressible beauty "Lift thine lustrous eyes, fair one, the enemies of Heaven can harm thee no longer"

But the terrified girl remained motionless only her soft, full bosom, white as the lotus-lily, heaved gently up and down in restless, irregular respiration

"Alas!" cried Pururavas "She cannot yet recover her reason. It has been too rude a shock for her. Behold how her breasts tremble with the throbbing of her heart."

"Fie, sister, awake!" called Chitralekha, trying to revive her friend "Tis not worthy of an *apsara* to faint like this"

Slowly the lovely eyes opened, like twin sapphire pools into which the sun has smiled

"Rejoice, dearest sister," said Chitralekha, smiling "The hateful Titan has been vanquished!"

Urvasie's white hand fluttered to her bosom

"Vanquished?" she breathed "By whom? By Indra, the omniscient, ubiquitous one?"

"Nay, by this King, whose greatness and glory equal Indra's" Smilingly Chitralekha indicated Pururavas,

who sat across from her, on the other side of Urvasie's

"O noble King!" cried Urvasie, turning an entranced gaze upon the gallant Pururavas, who returned it with ardour, engendering in the divine maiden an emotion as exquisite, as deep, as urgent as his own

"'Tis passing strange to think," thought Pururavas, musing over the parentage of the lovely Urvasie as revealed to him by Chitrlekha "that the withered old Saint Narayan could have created so wondrous and perfect a creature as this,—who is, moreover, supposed to have sprung from his thigh! Could an aged ascetic grown grey with poring over the scriptures, all unconscious of the sweet emotion of love, fashion so exquisite a thing?"

The King's thoughts were interrupted by their arrival upon the Peak of Gold, where the eager *apsaras* collected around the chariot to receive their beloved companions.

"Oh, sisters!" cried Urvasie joyfully "I never thought I should see your dear, sweet faces again"

Whilst the nymphs were happily chattering together the sound of chariots descending from the heavens was heard from the East, and looking up, they saw Chitrarath, King of the *Gandharvas*, bearing down upon them in a golden carriage

"Hail, great King!" said he, as he alighted and bowed before Pururavas "Heaven owes thee a debt of gratitude"

"Hail to thee, dear friend" responded Pururavas warmly "Welcome to Pratisthana! What brings thee here today?"

"We were on our way to rescue the captured Urvasie when we learnt from the heavenly bards of thy victory over the abhorrent Kayshie—But come with us, friend to Maghavan, with the lovely Urvasie and her companions For 'tis thy strong arm hath rescued her from the fell Titan's grasping hands"

"Nay," declared Pururavas modestly "It would not become me to see the King of Heaven Do thou lead the lovely one before the great Indra, dear friend"

"If thou wilt insist," said Chitrarath resignedly "But methinks thou'rt too modest Thy matchless courage hath fired the imagination of all of Heaven's inmates"

Urvasie and the other nymphs then made ready to depart, after thanking the King profusely At the final moment of parting, however, the ravishing Urvasie, with typical womanly guile, delayed her departure by feigning to disentangle her anklet from a creeper

The eyes of the lovers met and locked in a passionate glance,—a long look full of eloquent meaning, rapturous yet exceedingly sorrowful

Unable to stretch the moment further, or delay the pangs of farewell longer, Urvasie at last soared up into the sky after her friends, still looking down at the King, who held her fascinated gaze with passionate entreaty in his own dark, brooding eyes

"Oh, Urvasie, Urvasie, my love!" cried Pururavas in despair, as the vaporous skies absorbed his beloved into their depths in the twinkling of an eye "Enchantress!—Siren! Thou makest me dream of mad, impossible things, thou lovely, bewitching thing! Thou hast soared into thy heavens, thou elusive bird of paradise, tearing my heart out of my breast! It goes with thee like a bleeding, battered thing, pierced by cruel arrows Ah, Love! Love! Like a starry gift of the gods, thou camest to me out of the blue,—and thou hast vanished into the blue again, like the fickle wind that blows for a moment,—and is gone"

Disconsolate at his loss, Pururavas rambled on until the pall of night descended upon him where he stood, solitary upon the peak of Gold Stumbling in the darkness that matched the gloom in his soul, he climbed down the hill at last, making his way slowly back to his palace of marble

To the bereaved lover mourning for his lost beloved, this marvellous stone edifice appeared suddenly like a great tomb,—a vast, empty vault,—desolate and devoid of all joy

CHAPTER II

IN A SECLUDED CORNER of the palace gardens, thick with the green foliage of the flowering *asoka* trees that shed their fragrant blossoms upon the ground like a carpet of multi-coloured design, there sat a round rubicund figure dressed in the habit of a Brahmin, upon a green iron bench of rustic pattern, thoughtfully chewing *pan-super*. This was the King's closest friend and companion, Manavaka, who, by virtue of his possessing a witty turn of mind, (though, it must be admitted, a somewhat dubious one), also held the title of the King's Jester. Impatiently he waited for his royal friend to complete his affairs of state, and join him in the restful arbour.

"This secret of the King's weighs too heavily upon my stomach!" thought the Brahmin. "I don't know how long I shall be able to contain it. I had better stay put in this solitary nook, or it will spill itself out before I can say 'Radha-Krishna'—But look whos here! My dainty lady Nipunika!—And how did Your Ladyship find me out in this long, labyrinthine garden, where one can go on playing hide-and-seek forever?"

Nipunika, the Queen's lady-in-waiting and confidante, was a slender young woman clad in a rich red *sari*, with a red-and-gold *choli* to match. Her glossy black hair was coiled into a bun at the nape of her neck, and adorned with a half-moon of clustering white *champa* blossoms that glistened with silver threads woven into a cobwebby pattern. Her bright eyes shone in her smooth, dusky face, their darkness accented by the black *agur* ointment, whilst her full red mouth owed its colour to the betel palm with areca nut which she constantly chewed.

"S'r Manavaka," said the lady-in-waiting. "I'm glad I've found you, for I have something important to ask you."

"A question! Has the old girl got wind of the King's

amour, after all?" thought the Jester, afraid to trust his tongue, which had a habit of running away with him

"My lady Queen," resumed Nipunika, "is anxious to ascertain what ails her lord the King, since he returned from his pilgrimage to the Sun"

"Ails the King?—Ails the King?" asked Manavaka, assuming a bluff manner "Why, nothing ails him,—he is in the pink of health! You can assure Her Majesty on that score"

"No," persisted Nipunika "He is not himself at all He is definitely preoccupied with something He does not eat well, nor does he take any interest in his state affairs, or sports—And twice he has addressed the Queen by the name of another!"

"Oh-ho! So that's it Now we come to the point!" thought Manavaka, his eyes popping out of his dome-shaped head "So the King has let out his own secret, after all!"

"A-hem!" said the Jester aloud, twirling his moustache, as he played for time "And—er—what was the name by which he—er—mistakenly addressed the Queen?"

"Urvasie!"

"Well!" exclaimed the Jester, after a short tussle with his conscience, in which conscience lost "You may as well know all"

And forthwith he related to Nipunika the whole story of the King's rescue of the beautiful nymph in distress, and of his violent and hopeless infatuation for her But the subject of controversy himself appearing around the corner, Nipunika hastily dispersed before the preoccupied monarch could notice her presence

"Ah" sighed Pururavas, as he came over and stood against the ancient *asoka* tree, with his head in his hands "How swift, how cruel is the onslaught of Love's passion! No sooner did I set eyes upon her, than my heart was set aflame by arrows of fire Tell me, friend,—if thou knowest,—how should one beguile Love's desire?"

Prompted by peremptory twitchings in his belly, Mana-

vaka hopefully suggested that they pay a visit to the royal *babarchukhana*, where succulent juices, delicious *dhai*, spicy *salna*, sweet *ghulab-jhambs*, and sundry other salacious delicacies gurgling in *ghee* might beguile the emptiness that gnawed at the King's heart. Pururava, however, brushed the idea away with an impatient jerk of his head.

"Jah!" he exclaimed disdainfully. "Talk to me not of gourmandising! You judge me by your own appetites. I could not stomach the thought of food when my mind is devoured by a vision of that rapturous shape. Alas, what symmetry,—what perfection,—what celestial grace!"

"continued the King, with the maudlin gaze of the moon-struck lover that had become chronic with him. "Late. "Where are the words that can describe each lovely detail of that exquisite—that divine—form?"

"In the dictionary, of course," murmured Manavaka, suppressing a yawn.

"She needs no jewels or ornaments to set off her glorious beauty," rhapsodised the love-sick monarch before his friend nearly to extinction. "'Tis they borrow their grace and sparkle from her enchanting loveliness. She is indeed the model of perfection, the symbol of Beauty."

The bored and hungry Manavaka dozed off while the King waxed eloquent about the unparalleled charms of his beloved, to the annoyance of the latter.

"Manavaka!" he cried sharply, waking the Brahmin with a start. "You must think of some way by which I can attain my heart's desire."

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed the Jester facetiously. "When Indra was in love with Ahalya he had a *feria* for his Counsellor of Love! And you have me as your adviser. All lovers are mad!—But let me cogitate well! Don't disturb me with your moanings and groanings, I pray you."

Cocking his head to one side, and resting it upon his finger, the Brahmin feigned to be deep in thought.

meanwhile the King was lost in a reverie of his own

"Ah, beloved!" he murmured "Thy face, like a perfect moon, is too heavenly for my earthly lips—Yet why does my arm throb so violently, as though in expectation of thee?—Do I hear the tinkling feet of my love,—or is it my imagination?"

By a strange psychic force, a sort of uncanny seventh sense, Pururavas became aware of the presence of Urvasie near by. All his senses quickened with excitement—he waited impatiently for his beloved to reveal herself to his gaze

"I've got it!" squeaked the phlegmatic Manavaka, suddenly emerging from his trance with a triumphant gleam in his eye "Trust a Brahmin to find a solution for the world's ills,—he! he! he!"

But Pururavas' mind was up in the clouds,—he heard not a word uttered by his friend

"Don't you hear me, dreamer?" cried the Brahmin, making umbrage "I tell you, I've got a love-proof solution!"

"Well, speak," answered the King

"One way is—" began Manavaka. Before he could complete his sentence, however, a rolled birch-leaf fell between the King and himself, as though darted by an invisible hand

"Help! Help! Murder!" cried Manavaka, starting up in fright

But the King laughed at him

"Don't be afraid," he said, smiling "It's only a birch-leaf"

Looking closer, however, he gave an exclamation of surprise

"Why," he declared "It's a fairy birch-leaf with writing on it!"

"Ah," exclaimed Manavaka "The fair Urvasie has heard your piteous love-calls, and sends you a love-letter in response"

"It's true! It's true!" cried Pururavas joyfully, opening

out the leafy scroll, and eagerly devouring the writing upon it "Your guess is absolutely correct"

"Is it ever wrong?" quipped the irrepressible Manavaka

"Listen " exclaimed the King, unable to contain his excitement " 'My Lord and my King' Loved I not thee with true Love's deathless passion, and with ardour strong, as fierce, as thine own would then the soft breezes of Heaven, and the evergreen *parijata* blossom that carpet the gardens of Nandana, burn me like the hot flames of hell?—Urvasie' "

"*Shabash!*" cried Manavaka "I hope you are satisfied now I know exactly how you feel I've felt just like that when I was famished, and someone turned up with a trayful of sweets "

"Great Brahma! What a simile!" laughed the King. "But I'm far from satisfied This note from my love has set my heart on fire! Pray hold this precious scroll from me, friend, or my moist fingers will surely blot out the dear writing "

Hardly were the words out of his mouth, when Chित्रलेखा stood before the King, smiling gaily

"Oh, welcome, welcome, fair friend!" cried Pururava in a seventh heaven of delight "But where is thy sister the divine Urvasie?"

"The silver lining comes always *after* the cloud " answered Chित्रलेखा, smiling obliquely

Manavaka, dazzled by the nymph's fair face and lithely slender form, was astonished to learn that this was not the wondrously beautiful Urvasie herself

"What!" he declared in an aside to the King "This is only the bosom friend of Urvasie? How should I imagine that wonder, then?"

"Did I not tell you so?" murmured the King triumphantly

"You did about a million times," admitted the Jester "But I took your words for the drivellings of a love-maddened fool"—I can hardly wait to see her now, though

judging by this lesser vision that is so utterly captivating," sighed Manavaka, gaping his fill at the lovely Chित्रलेखा

"Great King," said the nymph "Urvasie bids me bow down before her lord, begging——"

"Can a queen beg her slave?" interrupted the King gallantly

"——that she whom thou didst save from cruel Titan hands now needs more than thy pity to save her from the crueller ravages of love"

"Oh, Chित्रलेखा, canst thou not see me agonising for her?" cried Pururavas in a storm of passion "Doth not iron with iron meet in red-hot fire—and steel with steel—oh, when shall my love be united with me?"

At a sign from Chित्रलेखा, Urvasie, who had been eavesdropping on all that was being said whilst remaining invisible herself now revealed herself at last

"Hail to my Lord,—conqueror of the world!" she said, shyly approaching the King, her whole body quivering with emotion and excitement

"I shall not be a conqueror of the world," murmured Pururavas ardently, "until you have given me your lips, beloved, so far granted to no living man"

His face suffused with happiness, Pururavas took both Urvasie's hands in his own, drawing her down beside him on the garden seat

Manavaka meanwhile was struck dumb with wonder and amazement at the incredible perfection of face and form of the peerlessly lovely nymph Goggle-eyed and unbelieving, he stared at the sculptured, statuesque figure clad in garments of rose and gold, the radiance and glow of her celestial personality hitting him directly between the eyes It was a long time before the incorrigible Brahmin could find his ever-ready tongue

"I am a great Brahmin, and the bosom friend of the mighty King of the World," he said pompously "Wilt thou not vouchsafe some small favour to me?"

Urvasie bowed and smiled graciously upon the Brahmin,

which turned his head so much, that he fell abject upon his knees, kissing the hem of her soft, silken garments

The tête-a-tête between the King and Urvasie did not however, last long For a messenger of the gods arrived upon the scene to hustle the nymphs back to Heaven for the command performance of a play to be staged before the mighty Indra

With silent tears Urvasie bade farewell to the King "Beloved! Must thou go so soon?" cried Pururavas in despair, trying to hold back the reluctant nymph "Must our meetings always be brief and interrupted like this?—Oh, do not forget Pururavas!"

"Is it possible I should ever forget thee my love?" murmured Urvasie, as she sorrowfully took leave of her royal lover, flying upwards with Chitrlekha and the messenger of the gods

"Gone! Gone! Ah, woe is me!" lamented the King

"Oh, oh, how shall I console him now?" thought the Jester, scratching his head Then he remembered the birch-leaf love-letter

But alas! the precious missive that had been entrusted to him for safe keeping was nowhere to be found The truant wind had snatched it from his pocket scattered it upon the ground, and blown it away,—Heaven alone knew where

The harassed Brahmin looked hither and thither in an agony of suspense, but to no avail The birch-leaf letter had completely disappeared!

Within a few minutes, Manavaka's fears were realised when Pururavas, remembering the letter, demanded to see it

In vain the luckless Manavaka renewed his search "What!" he exclaimed feigning surprise "Gone! How? When? Where?" Then an idea occurred to him "I have it!" he cried "It was a fairy birch-leaf, was it not? Then it has flown back to Heaven with its author, 'rse!"

But the King was far from satisfied with this explanation, and cursed the Jester for a careless fool

Meanwhile, in another part of the garden hard by, the Queen Ausninarie strolled arm-in-arm with her lady-in-waiting, Nipunika, exchanging confidences

The Queen was a woman of regal and imperious beauty, with an olive complexion, dark smouldering eyes, and masses of magnificent black tresses parted in the centre, and rolled into a graceful bun at the back of her head. She was clad in a creamy white Benaresi *sari* brodered with gold thread, whilst a fitting muslin *choli* moulded her shapely figure. Upon her forehead she wore the red *lak* mark of the married woman

The Queen wore no smile upon her lips, her whole expression being one of tense rigidity and suspense

"Nipunika!" said the Queen, as she espied the King behind the trees. "Look!—There is the King, with Manavaka. I shall stand behind these creepers, and listen to my lord as he unburdens his soul to his friend"

Just then, the wind blew the rolled birch-leaf along the ground, making it come to rest before the feet of the two women. Idly the lady-in-waiting picked it up, opening it mechanically. She was astonished to see the writing on it, carved in a delicate feminine hand. Without a word, she pointed it out to the Queen, who flushed dark red as her burning eyes took in the impassioned declaration of love

"So!" she exclaimed angrily. "A love-letter from that nymph to my lord!"

Impulsively she approached from behind the creepers, confronting the King with the offensive love-letter

"My lord," said she coldly. "Pray do not upset yourself! Here is your precious letter"

"Oh, welcome, welcome, dear Queen," said Pururavas, trying to cover up his confusion. "I—I—was not looking for this letter, but an important document of state," he finished lamely

This statement, however, failed to convince the in-

censed Queen Drawing herself up to her full stature she departed in anger, followed by her lady-in-waiting. In vain did Pururavas follow her, craving her pardon. The ruffled queen refused to be mollified. Disdainfully she went her way in silence, haughty and uncompromising.

CHAPTER III

IN FRONT OF a small grey-and-white cottage, set amidst delightfully sylvan surroundings in Heaven, there stood two young monks, clad in long, saffron-coloured robes, their matted hair tied up above their heads, sandals upon their chests, and garlands of fragrant *parijata* flowers around their necks. They were Galava and Pelava, the disciples of Saint Bharata, who were engaged in animated conversation.

They were, in fact, discussing the staging of the drama "Luxmi's Choice" by command of the great Indra, which had caused great stir and excitement in heavenly circles.

"Do you know," said Pelava earnestly, "that Urvashi's forgetfulness on the stage made the whole house titter and sent Saint Bharata into paroxysms of terrible rage?"

"Yes, I heard that she made an unpardonable slip of the tongue," answered the other disciple.

"I was backstage with Saint Bharata when it happened," continued the first monk. "When Menaka stood as her part required, 'Upon which of these great ones hast thou fixed thy maidenly love?' the nymph instead of answering 'Purushottam, as it is in the text' absent-mindedly uttered the name 'Pururavas'! You can imagine the reaction of the audience! As for the sage he fumed and fretted and raved till he was blue in the face. When poor Urvashi came off the stage she received such a dressing-down as would have moved a heart of

stone At last, Indra himself came to her rescue 'Since thou hast lost thy heart so irrevocably to my great friend and ally,' said he, 'I shall grant thee permission to go to him, and love him as thy lord until thou hast borne a son to him, and he has looked upon his lotus face'—Jrvasie was convulsed with happiness when she heard this She fell down at Lord Indra's feet, covering them with kisses "

"No doubt she deemed her error on the stage was a blessing in disguise," remarked Galava

In the courtyard without the King's palace at Prati-sthana, a grey-haired man in the uniform of King's chamberlain, stood at attention at the entrance of the beautiful House of Gems, near a great staircase that led up to the lofty building

This was Latavya, the Chamberlain of the King's Seraglio, who waited patiently for the King to emerge from vesper worship, as he had an important message to deliver to His Majesty from the Queen At last, accompanied by Manavaka, and followed by a train of girl attendants carrying torches, the King appeared, looking pale and haggard, the strain of continual nights of sleeplessness telling upon his appearance

"Long live the King!" cried Latavya, as he bowed before Pururavas "I have a message to deliver to Your Majesty from Her Majesty the Queen, who bade me say she would be pleased if Your Majesty would graciously join her on this *poonam* night of the moon's splendour, upon the terrace of the House of Jewels, where Her Majesty intends to offer sacrifice to *Chandra* "

"The Queen's wish," answered the King gravely, "shall be obeyed to the letter, Latavaya "

The procession then continued on its way until it came to a halt outside the entrance to the stairway that led up to the terrace of the House of Jewels Here the King dismissed the attendants, climbing the great stairway in the company of his friend, Manavaka Arrived at the top, the two friends leaned against the parapet of the

white, marble terrace as they waited for the Queen

As they watched the glorious panorama around bathed in the grey-blue mist of an Indian twilight, the smiling Moon arose in all her golden roundness and radiance shedding brilliant lustre on all the earth—turning the King to thoughts of love, romance, and Urvashi! Sighing he gazed hopefully upwards at the heavens, wondering where she might be

Pururavas' romantic thoughts were, however, soon brought to earth, for the Queen entered the terrace, accompanied by Nipunika, and attended upon by her maidens carrying offerings for the sacrifice in round gold-and-silver *thallas*, or little pots and vases, artistically designed in gold or silver. Clad in simple white with lilies in her dark tresses garlands of fragrant *moghras* and jasmines around her neck, and the *kum-kum* mark upon her clear forehead, Aushinara made a picture of sylvan simplicity and charm that went straight to the King's heart, stirring it to compassionate affection for his once-loved Queen

"How sweet and charming the Queen looks, my Lord," remarked Manavaka, throwing an appreciative glance towards her. "Either because she is going to give me a lot of sweets, or because she is no longer angry with you, and wants you to forget her recent show of temper."

"Yes," agreed the King, thoughtfully gazing at his wife. "She looks gracious and fair and kind indeed, all her regal pomp and grandeur put away for sweet and gentle humility to her husband."

Approaching the King Aushinara joined her hand together in humble *namaste*

"My lord!" said she in a low voice

"Welcome, dear lady!" responded Pururavas, as he came forward to greet her

"Bear with me awhile, my lord," said Aushinara, "until I fulfil my vow at your feet"

Upon the King's enquiring of his Queen what vow

she had to fulfil, Nipunika explained on the latter

behalf, that it was a vow made by women to win the favour of their loved ones. Feeling more than slightly guilty, Pururavas hastened to assure the Queen of his affection, declaring she had no need to make such a vow, for it was *he* who craved for favours.

Aushinarie then made her offering to *Chandra*, with flowers, coconuts, sweets, and costly perfumes, worshipping the silvery moon-beams that streamed down upon the terrace, enveloping her frail, white form in its benign radiance.

"Dear my lord," whispered Aushinarie "Come closer to me, I pray you."

"Here I am, dear," replied Pururavas.

Bowing before her husband with folded hands, the Queen then recited her vow in an atmosphere of hushed silence.

"I, Aushinarie," said she in a low voice "call to witness upon this glorious night, the divine Mrigalanchhan and his wife Rohinie, that I shall ever love and obey my dear lord. And if he should love another woman, and she return his affection, I swear to love and embrace her as a sister, without a thought of jealousy."

"Well, this is most convenient indeed! And very noble and obliging of the Queen," thought Manavaka, throwing a meaning glance at the King. "Now all that is wanting is for the nymph to appear and complete this ideal triangle!"

The nymph was, in truth, at that very moment in their midst, had Manavaka been empowered with the vision to see her. With Chित्रलेखा by her side, she stood invisible among them, watching and listening to all that was being said, with fervid, burning heart, not without its pangs of understandable jealousy.

Urvashi had come flying down from Heaven, in a fever of excitement to see her lord again. But upon seeing the Queen and her attendants, she had abstained from revealing herself. With admiration she had noted the Queen's majestic beauty, and wondered at the no-

me to speak thee words of comfort and peace 'Tis true words avail little in the face of such grief and sorrow, whose pangs can only be dulled or blunted by the passage of time—But brace thyself, O King, for thy people's sake

"The Saint, whose supernatural powers enable him to pierce the veil of truth beyond this life, bids me tell thee, that in days gone by, Trinabindu, the famous recluse, had, by his religious toils and penances, made Indra feel insecure in his position. The god thereupon sent down to earth a celestial nymph named Harini, to lure Trinabindu away from his austerities. When the Saint saw her, he cursed her for her wanton beauty bidding her be exiled on earth. Upon her humbly pleading for mercy however, he relented a little. 'When thou shalt see the flowers of Heaven again thy exile on earth shall end' said he. 'Twas this nymph that was born in Bhoja's house as Princess Indumatī, whom thou didst win for bride. Destiny beckoned her to Heaven with those celestial flowers that fell upon her breast—she could not help but go!

"Oh, mourn her not too much, good King. Before Fate's decree, all men must bow, even kings. And the tears of loved ones disturb the departed souls. This transient life is but bondage to the immortal soul which is liberated by Death. The wise should not grieve when the soul shakes off the earthly shackles that bind it in life."

Aja bowed silently before the Saint's message, but the words of counsel fell on unheeding ears. His stricken spirit endured life's toll for eight long years, till his son was grown to manhood. Then renouncing food and drink, he went to the holy place at the confluence of the Ganga and the Sarayu, where he shed his earthly body to join his fair love again in the heavenly groves of Nandana.

CHAPTER VII

DASAPATHA, THE SON of Aja and Indumati, was hailed by his subjects as a worthy successor to his great father. For he who was descended from Manu's noble race worked untiringly for his folk.

Straight as an arrow, upright of character, self-controlled, and scorning idle pleasures, Dasaratha rivalled Yama, Varuna, and Kuvera in his qualities. Mighty archer that he was, he circled the earth in his car, conquering all who came in his way. Kings bowed before him by the hundreds, as he poured forth his rain of arrows, breaking up their hostile ranks. Conquering hero of the world, he returned to Ayodhya at last, proclaiming his triumph, wielding supreme power. And no rival dared question his greatness, for his glory blazed like the noon-day sun. But he had not yet reached the peak of his ambitions.

Upon the banks of the Sarayu river he offered a great horse-sacrifice,—the sacrifice for universal dominion,—expending all the wealth he had won in his conquest of the world. Clothed in deerskin, with staff and horn in hand, he appeared like a very incarnation of Śiva.

Fighting side by side with Indra, he put to rout the evil demons who troubled saintly rites, his magic archery winning the admiration of celestial maidens, who sang his praises aloud in the heavens. When Dasaratha had raised his famous dynasty to greater brilliance, lustre, and magnificence, he wedded three lovely princesses,—of Magadha, Kosala, and Kekaya,—with whom he dwelt in perfect happiness, except that no son was born to him.

One day, when the King was out hunting in the forest, his staid affairs of state forgotten in the thrill of the chase, he heard a gurgling sound as of an elephant quenching his thirst. Forgetful of the sacred law for-

bidding kings to slay elephants, and impatient to handle his bow and arrow, Dasaratha thoughtlessly loosed his shaft with hurtling speed through the air, and alas! reached his mark without fall

"Oh father!" a pathetic cry rang out in the clear, morning air

Stricken with horror and compunction, the King rushed forward to the edge of the river, to discover a young lad with a water-jar in his hand, lying grievously wounded among the reeds. At the tragic sight, a pang of remorse and sorrow shot through the King's heart

Lifting up the boy in his great arms, he heard the *muni's* son — for so he turned out to be — tell him in faltering tones where his blind parents waited for him in the wood. Dasaratha carried the wounded boy to them, and sorrowfully related the tragedy he had unwittingly brought upon their heads. In his parents' arms, crying with the agony of pain, the unfortunate boy expired. The weeping parents then cursed Dasaratha in their anguish and despair.

"When thou art old, thou too, shalt lose a son and die of grief, as we die now!" wept the blind father of the dead boy

The King bowed his head in humility

"I fully deserve thy curse, O saintly recluse," he answered sorrowfully. "Yet I have no son who has charmed me with his flower-like face," he added wistfully

Then bringing fire-wood for the funeral rites he prepared the pyre for the unhappy boy. Tenderly laying him upon it, he kindled the flames at the request of the *muni*. Soon all was over,—the child lay dust to dust and ashes to ashes, upon the ground, mourned by his old and sightless parents

Shaken by the harrowing tragedy, his spirits damped by the unholy curse,—which yet carried with it the promise of a son to be born—Dasaratha returned to the capital, a much sadder and wiser man

Years elapsed, and Dasaratha's rule multiplied in

splendour, but his life remained unblessed by the birth of a son. In vain he yearned for divine grace to grant him a child, but even as the deep seas will not yield their choicest pearls without delay, so Dasaratha had to wait patiently for the boon of a son.

At last his priest began the holy rite which might win a Prince for the heirless King. As the fates would have it, all the gods, including the mighty Indra, led a delegation to Almighty Vishnu at about the same time, to complain against the tyranny and oppression of the ten-headed Ravana, the dread Demon King of Lanka. They were received graciously by the Supreme Being, three-fold yet One, who framed all things in Creation.

Bowing low before the All-embracing, All-knowing Omniscience, the gods said:

"O Supreme One, those who fix their eyes upon Thee, and trust in Thee, do find a happy release from earthly re-incarnation, for thou dost completely cleanse and purify the soul of man. Oh, how blissful must be complete soul-union with Thee!"

The gods then prayed for redress against the *Rakshas* Ravana.

"I know well," replied the Supreme Being "how the *Rakshas* has smitten your glory, even as Ignorance and Lust destroy Truth and Wisdom. With evil demon strength he plagues the Worlds. But his fate is now doomed. For incarnate as Dasaratha's son, I shall slay his clustering heads upon the battlefield. Thereafter your holy offerings and sacrifices shall remain unspotted, and gods and men shall be able to live in peace, undisturbed and freed from his oppression."

Meanwhile the King's priests completed the sacrificial rites to win him a son. Suddenly there emerged from the sacrificial fire a Divine Shape, which carried in its arms a golden dish filled with rice and milk, in which lay the Almighty, and offered it to the King. After Dasaratha had drunk the sacred, God-given draught, he offered it to his Queens, Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra.

All Earth seemed bright and fair, and cleansed of sorrow and sin, when the royal trumpets announced the birth of four Princes to the Queens,—Rama, Bharata, Lakshman and Satiughna

Cleansed and purified according to the law the Divine Princes grew in beauty and fraternal love dear above all the world to their father

Whilst Rama was still a boy, wearing oak ringlets around his cherubic face, the Brahmin Kausika came to the King, begging him to send Rama to help destroy the demons who marred his sacrifices Without hesitation the King acceded to the Brahmin's wish, sending Rama and Lakshman his favourite brother, with the Saint

"Go with the Saint, my beloved children," said Dasaratha, as he bade farewell to his sons "May your adventure prosper well Farewell Your father's prayer and thoughts protect you all the way"

The brave archer-boys then set off on their journey amid the anxious looks of the people, for all wondered at the nature of their mission, considering their tender years But children though they were, accustomed to walking marble floors they strode cheerfully on beside the Saint, who beguiled the rough way with many absorbing tale of olden times—lovely legends that lifted them up, and carried them away, as it were on the crest of a wave marvellous tales of war, adventure romance, and love, which the old saint wove with spell-binding brilliance for their princely ears

With potent, magic spells and words the Saint sustained the strength of those little legs, so that they felt no more fatigue than when they promenaded beside their mothers in the palace gardens

"Bala, Atibala," they chanted the magic formulæ, as the Saint had taught them, and marched merrily onward with renewed energy All nature smiled as they sauntered light-heartedly along the rippling waters of the lotus-covered lakes, amid the happy chirping of birds, plucking

flowers that blossomed overnight to brighten their way.

under a canopy of clouds that miraculously appeared in the sky to protect their bare heads from the sun's rays

With his charming rubicund face, bright eyes, and curly hair Rama appeared like "the archer of the flowery bow," as he walked towards the penance grove of Kausika with his bow held playfully above his head Suddenly, at the sound of his bowstring the detestable demon Taraka, with visage black as night, appeared in the air, and rushing through the trees, swooped down upon Rama with fierce hatred, screeching like a witch all the while With a swift, god-like grace, Rama raised his lissom young arms, and let off an arrow at the fell creature which reached her horny bosom, bringing her lifeless to the ground, with sandalwood, gore, human entrails, skulls and various weird charms clattering down with her The Saint breathed a silent prayer of thanksgiving at the slaying of the fell demon, and fervently thanked the boy-hero, whose prowess had been proved beyond all doubt

Soon after, they arrived at the penance-grove of Kausika, glad to reach their journey's end Rama felt strangely happy to enter that grove which was once the haunt of the Dwarf,—a previous incarnation of Vishnu's—who saved the world from the tyranny of the Demon Bali As soon as they reached the Saint's cottage, where the priests were engaged in their holy rites, Rama and Lakshman stood guard to protect their prayers and offerings from the disturbances of the demon hosts, their bows and arrows at the ready

Whilst they still prayed, the priests saw with horror that the altar was defiled with blood At once they ceased their prayers, throwing away the sacrificial bowls In the twinkling of an eye, Rama drew from his quiver a pointed steel arrow aimed it at the demons who flew in mid-air over the altar, brought down two of their leaders Maricha and Subahu dread emissaries from the court of Ravana, whilst he scattered the rest who fled in confusion before the power of the Almighty, as personified in young Rama

CHAPTER VIII

"How would you like to see the Bow of Siva, which neither god nor man has ever been able to break?" asked Kausika of Rama and Lakshman, the following morning

Both the lads clapped their hands in delight at the prospect, for they had heard many tales of the world-famous Bow since their childhood days

"Very well, you shall," replied Kausika "Today you shall accompany me to Mithila, whose King is celebrating a Sacrifice, to which all the Saints and Sages of the land have been invited He is the proud possessor of Siva's invincible Bow, and will show it to you"

Spending the day in journeying upon the road, and the night under the stars, the next day they arrived at the fair city of Videha, where they were welcomed by the citizens with great love and affection, the comely princes charming the hearts of all who saw them with their fair faces and youthful dignity

When Janaka, King of Mithila, saw them he wondered who were the handsome lads who walked with such majestic and fearless mien

"They are the sons of Dasaratha," answered the Saint

"They are more than welcome," said the King, receiving them affectionately

When the Sacrifice was over the Sage informed the King of the Princes' desire to see the mighty Bow of Siva The King at once ordered his nobles and warriors to bring forth the Bow

"Behold the mighty Bow, which generations of kings and warriors have failed to bend," said the King, when the weapon was brought forth

Rama gazed upon it with fascination

"Permit me," said he calmly, "to bend the mighty
Bow"

The King, however, only smiled at the impetuosity of the lad, whom he thought far too tender in years to try his strength upon the Bow

"Let him try it," urged the Saint "He is mighty and brave, though young in years"

"Nay, blessed one," replied the King "It would be unseemly to allow so tender a calf to break his strength in vain on a bow which many mighty archers have failed to draw"

"Thou knowest not, good King," persisted Kausika, "what stuff this lad is made of His heroism transcends his years What is mere age in hero-souls?"

At last, persuaded by the Saint, the King gave in, though he did not for a moment believe that Rama could succeed Secretly he regretted that he had made the bending of the Bow the condition for the bestowal of the hand of his lovely child Sita in marriage, for he had lost his heart to this noble boy

But Rama smilingly lifted the Bow that Siva used, and before the amazed eyes of the whole company, strung it with the greatest ease, with no more force, it appeared, than the Love-god used for his flowery one, then bent it with resistless strength, until it snapped in the centre with a mighty twang that reverberated through the hall and beyond with a thunderous roar, before which all were stunned and fell down in terror, except the King and the Sage

"Today I have beheld a mighty wonder!" exclaimed the King, rejoicing in high-born Rama's unbelievable prowess "Rama is peerless indeed, for such transcendental strength as could snap Siva's renowned Bow hath never been known before

"He hath by his matchless heroism won the hand of my beloved daughter Sita"

Before the sacred fire, and before all the assembled company, the King bestowed his lovely child, heaven-born Sita, upon the noble Prince Then he sent his revered priest to Kosala, to bid Dasaratha come to his son's wedding Escorted by a vast army, Dasaratha hastened

to Videha, where amid unimagined scenes of splendour and magnificence Rama and Sita were wedded

Happy beyond words, King Dasaratha set forth on the Homeward journey with Rama and Sita and Lakshma. The royal party moved steadily forward, but evil signs and portents soon marred their peaceful journey. Fierce winds rose up from the north, tearing down their banners, and making it impossible for them to continue the march. A dark ring overcast the sun, whilst the sky was crowded with vultures. Bloody clouds hung down to the earth, presenting a fearsome spectacle. To make matters worse, a troop of jackals howling in the wilderness made them shudder and turn pale.

"What mean these portents, O Priest?" asked Dasaratha fearfully of his priest.

"All will turn out well, my Liege," reassuringly answered the Priest. But hardly were the words out of his mouth when lo! a dazzling form appeared before them, which shaped itself into a Warrior, whom Dasaratha recognised as great Bhrigu's son, Parasu-Rama, the sworn enemy of the warrior-race, who, twenty-one times had swept them from the face of the earth, beginning with his own mother, whom he had slain at the command of his father.

Dasaratha was sorely distressed to see this inveterate enemy of his race, for his sons being not yet full-grown men, he felt acutely at a disadvantage against the mighty foe. He greeted him politely, but the enemy scorned to vouchsafe his greeting, his eyes turning disdainfully towards Rama, his namesake, whose great fame as hero and warrior had scorched him with jealousy and envious hatred.

"Tis told abroad thou hast bent Siva's Bow," said he sneeringly to Rama, "which had never been bent before by man or god, thus winning lovely Sita for bride!—Yes, thou bearest my name renowned throughout the world and would match my glory!—Ha! ha! ha!—Know then, O ambitious one, that would aspire to reach my fame, thou shalt own the dreaded axe that breaks the neck which

iares defy me!—And no one offends me more than thee, thou stubborn seedling of the warrior-race!—I shall know no peace of mind if thou live on unconquered

"That Bow which thou didst bend had lost its primitive strength, therefore was thou able to bend it with ease But take *my* bow, and bend it, if you can! Then will I acknowledge thee victor "

But Rama merely smiled, then stretched forth his hand to take the proffered bow As the Bow of Vishnu, it seemed familiar to his touch as he held it lightly between his fingers, laughing in his enemy's face After placing it on the ground Rama strung it, then held it high above his head To the wonder and amazement of the whole company, he grew in stature, strength, and personality, whilst the splendour of his foe dwindled away as though by magic With compassion in his eyes, Rama saw his namesake lose his erstwhile massive strength,—and stayed his fatal shaft

"I cannot make up my mind to slay thee without compunction, great hero," said he evenly, "though thou hast given me provocation enough — Choose thy fate! Shall I take thy life, —or wouldst thou live on, and lose Paradise forever?"

Greatly humbled, Parasu-Rama begged his life of the divine hero

"Oh, leave me, I pray thee, to wander about the world from one holy place to another — I know now that thou art the Incarnation of the Soul Supreme! My punishment at thy hands has exalted me, who once thought it a small thing to give up this world of Richness and Beauty and Abundance, fool that I was!"

"Thy wish is granted!" answered Rama And looking towards the East, he aimed his arrow thitherwards, thus closing to Parasu-Rama the gates to Paradise till the end of all time The defeated hero then went his way, vanishing for ever from the sight of men

Dasaratha then resumed the journey with his sons, at last arriving at Ayodhya, where the people gave them

a clamorous welcome, whilst Dasaratha's queens embraced and kissed the soft-eyed little bride of peerless charm and beauty

Then the young lovers departed on their honeymoon to the country palace of the King without the city, where they spent many happy hours wandering in the moonlight, or bathing in the pool that sparkled white with lotus blossoms. Their hearts intoxicated with love's ecstasy, Rama and Sita shared supreme joy and bliss together

"My beloved," whispered Rama, as Sita clung to him lovingly under the waters. "How beautiful are thy eyes thy hair, thy lips thy bosom! O my peerless darling, how much I love thee!"

Playfully Sita hid herself among the lotus blossoms, whilst her lover came in hot chase to find her. Again and again he kissed her, until she babbled incoherent words of joy and love and rapture, inflaming the heart of Rama with fiercest passion and desire

CHAPTER IX

NOW KING DASARATHA having drunk his cup of earthly happiness to the full, decided to bequeath his vast Realm and State upon his son Rama, so that he himself might retire to the forest, to spend his last years in preparation for death

The news spread like wildfire through the land that Rama was to be appointed sovereign, and there was great excitement and joy among the populace, for he was the favourite, the hero, the darling of all hearts. Only Rama himself wept to take his father's crown. Preparations were soon under way for the anointing of the new ruler with holy oil, sceptre, and sword

The whole court was in a turmoil and a hive of busy vity. On the eve of the day appointed for the cere

mony of installation, the marble palace-halls echoed with the shouts of the decorators, the streets were gaily festooned with flowers and flags, whilst at night the city was transformed into a fairy land of lamps

But there was one soul that did not rejoice in all this happy activity, and looked askance at the preparations, illuminations, and rejoicings of the people This was Kaikeyi, the second Queen, who, with one fell swoop, overthrew all the preparations, obstructed the course of truth and justice, and dashed the hopes of the entire kingdom. Egged on by her old nurse and slave Manthara, who hated Rama with a fierce hatred, Kaikeyi, the mother of Bharata was consumed with jealous envy at the good fortune of Rama, and of his great popularity with the people Finding the Queen Kaikeyi standing upon the terrace watching the illuminations, the ugly hunch-back Manthara sidled up to her saying

"How canst thou stand there watching all this merry-making, when thine own son has been bypassed for the throne in favour of Kausalya's son?"

"But Rama is the eldest son of the chief Queen," said Kaikeyi "How could Bharata become King?"

"Art thou mad?" cried Manthara, fuming with rage "Thou knowest not what grief and humiliation await thee and thy son, if Rama is installed as *Yuvarajah* to-morrow Thou shalt become the abject slave of Kausalya, and shall have to obey the commands of his proud wife Sita — And Bharata, — what of him? I have seen more summers than thou, and darksome deeds performed in royal houses I know Rama will drive him into exile into the jungle, or even slay him out of jealousy Act now, and prevent this happening Speak thy mind to the King. — he hath been captivated by the beauty, — he will grant thee thy desire! Hast thou no pride that thou wouldst allow a hated rival to get the better of thee?"

The seeds of envy and covetousness were well sown in Kaikeyi's heart She began to burn with jealous anger

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and enmity against Rama

"But how shall I persuade Dasaratha to make Bharata king?" asked Kaikeyi of the misshapen monster

"That will not be difficult" answered the hunchback leering "Hast thou forgotten the two boons thy husband promised to grant thee, when thou didst save his life? Thou didst need nought then "If ever I want anything, I shall remind thee," thou didst tell him Well, ask him now to exalt thy son to be king, and send Rama into exile for fourteen years"

Kaikeyi's eyes gleamed triumphantly at remembrance of her husband's promise

"I shall indeed demand it as my right," she exclaimed determinedly, hugging the old slave for her treacherous counsel

The old hag then instructed her how to act

"Go," said she commandingly, "to the mourning-chamber and there pretend to tear thy hair in grief and sorrow When the King seeks thee out, as he is sure to do confront him with his promises and demand their fulfilment

That night it happened in the mourning-chamber as the old hunchback had predicted

"Grant me the two favours that thou didst promise me when I save thy life" cried Kaikeyi, false tears in her eyes "or I shall surely die of grief tonight"

"Ask what thou wilt, and it shall be granted unto thee," answered Dasaratha magnanimously "May I never attain life eternal until I fulfil my promises"

"Then let royal actions speak for themselves" declared Kaikeyi triumphantly "First, let my son Bharata be made King Second let Rama be banished into the jungles for fourteen years, to live as a hermit in a dress of bark"

Kaikeyi's words plunged a knife into Dasaratha's Reeling under the blow, he nearly swooned, then, mingling with horror he stared Kaikeyi as though she were a fearsome nightmare,—a serpent who held him

spell-bound with terror Great rage filled his mighty heart

"Murderess witch, scorpion!" he cried shaking with fury "Wouldest thou kill me in my old age? What hath Rama ever done to thee that thou shouldst seek to wrong him, thou treacherous wretch?—I have indeed nurtured a poisonous snake in my bosom who seeketh to ruin my family!"

Kailevi eyed him with cold contempt

"If thou dost break thy promise to me then thou art a dishonourable man, and I shall kill myself here and now," said she stonily

Then Dasaratha wept scaling tears of bitterness and despair

"O ignoble one" he cried falling upon his knees "Ask for whatsoever else thou might but not this!—How can a father betray and banish his well-beloved son? How could such an evil thought lurk in thy bosom thou beautiful one? Thou hast trapped me with thy beauty, thou cruel pitiless creature!—Oh, would that Yama would recall me in this evil hour!"

Though the aged Dasaratha besought her upon his knees Kailevi demanded her pound of flesh like a vicious bird of prey, nor would be moved from her fell purpose

"If thou art honourable, thou wilt not break mine oath. If thou dost I shall poison myself this very moment" she repeated with relentless calm

All night long Dasaratha wept and lamented with grief but Kailevi would not be moved. Mercilessly she glared at him accusing him of favouritism towards Rama and injustice to her own son

"If thou wilt force thy evil will upon me, I will from this moment reject thee and thy son forever" she vowed. And she declared Dasaratha and Kailevi to be enemies. He hated in his eyes. Never again he would see of her. She appeared so long and distressed upon that dreadful day of tragic betrayal and evil-doing

At last the morning dawned amidst the rejoicings of the people, who danced and sang and cut capers in the gaily decorated streets, whilst they waited for their noble and well-loved Rama to be installed upon the golden throne set up for him under the canopy of a white umbrella, ancient symbol of royalty. Horses and elephants were harnessed in readiness for the royal procession. Every one was keyed up to the highest pitch of excitement, and every face registered expectancy and high hope as the time for the coronation drew near.

Then Sumantra, the chief counsellor of the King, approached the royal chamber to escort Dasaratha to the ceremony. But it was Kaikeyi who met him at the door, instead of the king.

"Go", said she in imperious tones, "and fetch Rama hither. For the King hath something of importance to say to him."

Sumantra bowed silently, wondering what could have happened to change the day's well-laid plans. When Rama received his father's summons, he at once entered his chariot, and drove towards the King's palace as Sita watched him from the window, praying to the gods to protect her dearly beloved husband.

The crowds shouted with joy and frenzy at sight of their hero whilst flowers were dropped upon his god-like head by adoring housewives, from latticed balconies above.

Entering the palace gates, he dismounted and crossed the inner court-yard until he came to the King's chambers, where he made obeisance to his father and to Kaikeyi. Dasaratha's tears fell fast and copiously at sight of his dearly beloved son. The pride and joy of his heart

tried to speak, but sobs choked his utterance.

Rama was shocked and dismayed to see his dear

father thus, — his body bent, his face haggard with grief, his eyes dimmed with sleeplessness.

"Oh, my dearest father!" he cried unhappily, falling

at his father's feet. "What have I done to make you

weep so?"

But Dasaratha could say not a word. He continued to gaze sorrowfully at his son.

"Oh, how have I grieved my dear sire?" cried Rama. "I would sooner die than cause him grief."—Oh mother tell me,—why is he grief-stricken? What has happened?"

Kaikei glanced contemptuously at her husband.

"The King is neither angry nor grief-stricken," answered Kaikei. "He is only afraid to speak his mind until thou wilt promise to obey."

"Oh speak," exclaimed Rama impetuously, "and I will obey, if I am asked to jump the highest hill. My promise is made and Rama hath never lied."

"Very well then," said Kaikei coldly. "The King hath promised me two boons when I saved his life long ago. Unfortunately, he regrets his promise like a dishonourable man. But if thou wouldst save thy father's honour, then leave Ayodhya at once for I want Bharata to be installed as king and thou to be banished into the forest for fourteen years."

The shameful words pierced Dasaratha's heart like a dagger, but Rama received them unflinchingly. Calmly he rose to his feet, his head held high in the air and looked Kaikei straight in the eye.

"My father's vow shall be fulfilled to the letter," he said proudly. "Let Bharata be installed as King—I shall spend this day in the jungle."

his dotage, and Kaikeyi hath bewitched him!—Seize the throne Rama, and slay thy father, if necessary The people love thee, and will rise against him, since he hath become a slave to a woman's desires!"

Lakshmana, the favourite brother of Rama, also tried to prevail upon him to do as his mother bade him

"Oh, Rama, my son, listen to thy brother's words," pleaded Kausalya piteously "Do not break thy old mother's heart!—Canst thou obey thy father's command and not thy mother's I command thee not to leave me! If thou wilt not listen, I shall fast unto death!"

"Mother, dearest mother, do not seek to keep me" begged Rama, his heart bleeding for his mother "I cannot go back on my word, once it has been given Do not, then, try to detain me I pray you!"

In vain did Kausalya plead with Rama not to go He tried to comfort her, but her burden of sorrow lay too heavily upon her old shoulders to be lifted With heavy heart, Rama went to Sita, who turned pale and clung to him when she heard what he had to relate

"I will go with thee, dearest, wherever thou goest I shall be happy as long as I am with thee Oh, do not leave me alone here, or I shall die!" cried Sita, tears welling up in her lovely eyes

"My darling" protested Rama tenderly clasping her in his arms, "Thou art dearer to me than my own life! How can I bear to see thee suffer for my sake? The jungle is no place for a lovely princess like thee!"

"But I am thy wedded wife" entreated Sita earnestly "and a wife's duty is to share her husband's sufferings as well as his joys I shall make thy way light for thee, and turn thy sorrow into joy, my Rama!—What care I for the palace and its luxuries without thee? The

le will be a Paradise with thee beside me, my love!"

"Oh Sita Sita, my dearest!" exclaimed Rama, deeply moved "Wilt thou not listen to reason? How canst thy delicate body stand the strain of life in the open, with its terrible hardships, its extremes of heat and

cold, and the hard rigours of the monsoon? Am I deliberately to expose my dear one to the hungry wild beasts that roam the forests,—to the myriad poisonous snakes and insects that creep upon the bare ground? Think, my precious, there will be no roof over thy head nor bed of softest down for thee to lie upon. Thou art frail and fragile and softly nurtured like a hot-house plant unused to hardships of any kind. How couldst thou withstand the vagaries of the cruel weather? When the rains come, and the storms break, is Rama to stand by and watch his beloved die of exposure to the elements?"

"I am not afraid of wind or rain nor even of the wild beasts that infest the jungles" obstinately declared Sita. "I would face them a thousand times over rather than live here without thee—Oh, Rama take me with thee, let me share thy life, my dearest lord!"

"Sweet," pleaded Rama. "Remain here and comfort my old mother, who is utterly broken-hearted. She needs thee beside her, to console her and soften her grief. — I shall love thee all the more when I am parted from thee! Sweetheart,—dearest one—wait here until I return to thee again."

But Sita remained adamant. Bursting into a storm of passionate tears and entreaties she swore to do away with herself if she were separated from him until at last Rama gave in, and consented to take her with him into exile. His brother Lakshman also came to Rama and made known his firm resolve to accompany him into the jungle. Great-hearted Rama, who had wept to relinquish the throne from his father, now cheerfully prepared to go into exile. But the people heard the evil news and grieved all their rejoicing and gaiety turned into gall and bitterness. Angrily they blamed the old King.

"We must be possessed by demons!" they muttered wrathfully. "Let us go after Rama and leave an empire for Bharata to rule over!" The cry was taken up and the multitudes resolved to follow Rama into exile.

Meanwhile Rama and Sita and Lakshman went bare-footed towards the King's palace, to bid farewell to Dasaratha and the Queens. Sorrowfully the people gazed at them, shouting slogans against the King and Bharata.

Cries of "Rama, thou shalt be avenged!" — "We will not accept Bharata's rule!"—"The King is bewitched!"—rent the air.

But Rama lifted up his hand to calm the excited crowds, nor would suffer any insult to his father. When they arrived at the palace, Dasaratha received them sorrowfully.

"I have been deceived by a woman," he lamented. "She hid the evil deep in her heart—My son, forgive me!"

Dasaratha begged them not to leave till the morrow, for it was now late.

"Nay," replied Rama resolutely. "Kaikeyi demanded my exit from this city this night—When twice seven years have passed by, we shall return again."

The King and his counsellors expressed their desire to send the royal army and huntsmen with grain and treasure into the jungle with Rama, but Kaikeyi put her foot down, loudly objecting to the plan. Rama himself brushed her protestations aside, however, by refusing to accept any soldiers or retinue.

"I want neither soldiers nor huntsmen, grain nor treasure," he declared proudly. "Give me the dress of bark, a spade, and a basket."

With a triumphant gleam in her eye, Kaikeyi hastened out of the room to bring the raiment of bark. When she returned, she brought not one, but three garments of bark. Shamelessly she handed them to Rama, who received them with anger in his eyes, for he could not tolerate the idea of his beautiful Sita wearing a dress of bark.

He and Laksman readily cast off their royal and jewellery donning the rough attire, but Rama would not offer the bark to his gentle Sita, who kept at the thought of assuming the rough garment. "I cannot wear such attire!" she whispered tremulously.

"Thou shalt not, beloved!" hotly declared her husband. Deliberately he threw the garment at Kaikeyi's feet, his eyes flashing with anger. But before she could protest Dasaratha himself interposed.

"The command to wear raiment of bark is obligatory on Rama alone," said he spiritedly. "Sita and Lakshman may wear what they please."

The base Kaikeyi was furious, but every one else rejoiced that noble Sita had not been allowed to be thus humiliated.

Then Rama and Sita and Lakshman bade farewell to all and amidst much lamentation and weeping they left the city in a chariot that was to take them to the edge of the forest. Vast multitudes followed them on foot determined to share exile with their beloved Prince.

That night they all slept upon the banks of the river Tamsa. But Rama lay awake all night thinking of the awful happenings of the day, of the sudden and unexpected reverse of fortune he had suffered. The thought of his heart-broken parents depressed him beyond measure, and he wondered sadly if he should ever see them alive again.

When the dainty dawn broke at last over the melancholy horizon, Rama woke Sita and Lakshman and the charioteer, and set off while the multitude was still slumbering. At the edge of the river the travellers alighted from the chariot and bade farewell to the charioteer who knelt at Rama's feet weeping to let them go.

"Farewell!" said Rama gently. "Give my last fond greetings to my parents, and bid them not grieve over my absence—And do not! I beg you apprise the multitude of the direction we have taken."

The three then crossed the river Tamsa continuing their weary march until they sighted the sacred river Ganga.

CHAPTER X

WHEN RAMA HAD departed, heart-broken Dasaratha recalled the *Muni's* curse of old, which hath doomed him to die of grief and sorrow at the loss of a dearly-beloved son

"Oh, *muni!*" cried he in his agony of soul "Now art thou revenged Now I die indeed of grief for a well-loved son, even as thou didst" And Dasaratha wept until his eyes grew dim and blind

Kausalya came to him, mourning for her son Bitterly she reproached him for his weakness and defect'on

"Oh, Dasaratha," she cried "If thou couldst break thy promise to thy counsellors and to the people that Rama should be thy heir, why couldst thou not break thy word to Kaikeyi?"

"Forgive me, Kausalya!" said the King brokenly "I am broken-hearted at the loss of my dearly beloved son Torture me not again, O Kausalya!"

Then Kausalya repented her harsh words, and husband and wife wept together

"Alas! My grief is like a gaping wound in my heart The pain of it makes forget myself!" sighed Kausalya placing her hand gently upon her husband's bowed shoulder

A few days later, Dasaratha cried out in the middle of the night in an agony of suffering

"Oh, Kausalya, I am dying! Hold thou my hand in thine, Kausalya and tell me I am forgiven!—Oh Rama, Rama, my son! Would that I could look upon thy face once more—hear thy dear voice again—Ah woe is me! I am doomed—doomed! Rama, Rama "

With his son's name upon his dying lips Dasaratha
back into the arms of Kausalya, and was silent
the morning the counsellors sent for Bharata who
on a visit to his grandsire's kingdom When the Prince

arrived his mother calmly informed him of his father's passing. Prostrated with grief and shock, the Prince fell down upon the floor, weeping.

"Oh, my father!" he wailed. "Would that thou wert alive to greet me! Alas! Thou art no more!—But where is Rama—who is like a father unto me now? Why is he not here to greet me?"

Then Kaikeyi thought to comfort him by telling him how she had won the kingdom for him. But Bharata recoiled with horror when he heard how she had manoeuvred the coup d'état.

"Oh, thou wicked wretch!" he exclaimed angrily. "Thou hast killed my father, and banished my brother! Thou hast robbed our house of all joy and brought calamity upon it!—What use have I for a kingdom when I have lost my dearest father and brother? 'Tis gall and bitterness to me!—But I shall not suffer Rama to be banished! he shall be brought back from the jungle and placed upon the throne!"

When Bharata met Kausalya the mother of Rama she greeted him reproachfully.

"Thou art now King, Bharata! Thy mother hath scrupled nothing to obtain the *raj* for thee," exclaimed Kausalya bitterly.

But Bharata fell down at her feet and begged forgiveness for his mother's grievous sin.

"I swear by Vishnu that I shall never sit upon Rama's wretched throne!" he declared solemnly. "Nor will I rest until I have brought him back from the jungle."

Kausalya wept with gratitude to hear these words and embraced the Prince, pleased with his nobility and loyalty to his brother. True to his promise Bharata tarried only a few days more to perform the last rites of his father, then departed with a large army in search of Rama.

It was in the forest of Chitrakuta that Bharata reached Rama down at last, with the help of hermits who showed him the direction he had followed.

Rama was grieved to hear of his father's passing but

would not be persuaded to return to his realm, though Bharata urged him again and again

"Nay, Bharata, I have sworn to my father to go into exile for fourteen years I cannot revoke my father's command"

Then Javali, a counsellor of Dasaratha, attempted to convince Rama that his sacrifice was quixotic and entirely unnecessary

"Rama," argued Javali "Why dost thou cloud thine intelligence with useless axioms? Thou hast obeyed thy father Now he is dead Is it sensible to continue this foolishness, when Bharata and all thy people want thee to return?—After all, a man is born into this world alone and he must die alone The loyalty he owes to his parents is transitory—Be reasonable, Rama thou hast but one life to live,—and then extinction! Make the most of it therefore, while it lasts Snatch thy kingdom which is offered to thee on a platter, and return to Ayodhya"

"What base doctrine is this, Javali?" exclaimed Rama, angered "Thy motives may be good, but thy reasoning is false and based upon evil Truth is the only path to virtue Truth endureth for all time The end can never justify the means, if they be based upon falsehood—If, as thou sayest, there is no life hereafter, but only the present, then wise men are fools who condemn the vicious for their quest of pleasure and evil and saints and sages have lived their lives of asceticism and sacrifice in vain—I declare before all men, I shall be faithful unto the vow I made to my father Let Bharata rule—I shall not leave the jungle until the appointed time"

Still Bharata sought to plead with Rama

"Very well," said he "If my father's command must be fulfilled, let me take the exile upon my shoulders, whilst Rama returns to rule"

Rama smiled

"Thou art disarming indeed Bharata," he observed "neither thou nor I can change the word of our father"

At last, in dejection, Bharata sent for a pair of sandals

tipped with gold, which he presented to Rama

"Wear these," said he "Since thou wilt not return, they shall serve the purpose"

Bharata then took the sandals which Rama had worn, and held them up before the whole army

"These sandals," he declared solemnly "are a symbol of Rama Since he will not accept the kingdom that is his I too, will don a dress of bark and live as a devotee for fourteen years, placing these sandals upon the throne, and ruling the kingdom as a trust for him In these sandals, therefore, is vested the real royal authority"

Thereafter bidding an affectionate farewell to Rama and Sita and Lakshman, Bharata returned to Ayodhya, where he spoke his mind to his counsellors

"I shall abide outside the city," in the forest of Nandigram, until my brother returns to Ayodhya" said he

The royal umbrella was held over Rama's sandals, while Bharata conducted all affairs of state from the jungle Thus did loyal Bharata seek to expiate his mother's sin

CHAPTER XI

THEY BRAG AN idyllic existence for the lovers Rama and Sita who enjoyed the myriad delights of a pastoral life cheerfully sustaining the rigours and hardships dangers and hazards that jungle life naturally involved

One night not long after they began their jungle existence Rama came home weary from the chase his face aching his eyes red-rimmed and heavy with fatigue

"My dearest lord" said Sita softly "Thou art exhausted with the hunting! Come rest in Sita's arms and thy fatigue is gone" Tenderly cradling her husband's head down upon her lap Sita crooned in a soft voice "Loving the tired eyes, and caressing the tumbled

locks that lay under her lips

"Sita, Sita" murmured Rama, happily relaxing in his wife's embrace "Oh, what should I do without thee, love? Glad am I that thou didst come with me, sweet-heart! Fool that I was to think that I could live without thee, my sweetest, dearest one!"

"Hush!" whispered Sita, stopping his mouth with her soft lips "Lie still, and rest, my dear love"

Contentedly the tired Rama relapsed into happy slumber, glad to do her dear bidding, dreaming sweet dreams of smiling Sita

Unknown to them, a vulture watched the lovers as they lay serene and quiet under the dark canopy of night, with no awning over their heads except the spreading network of ancient, venerable trees Suddenly, the bird swooped down upon them, and scratched Sita's gleaming white throat and bosom that lay bare under her emerald green *choli* With a terrified scream, Sita started up, awakening Rama, who quickly took up bow and arrow, and smote the venturesome offender in the eye With infinite tenderness, Rama comforted the frightened Sita, whilst he carefully nursed her bleeding bosom

Such accidents befell them daily, and though Sita suffered much from dread and alarm, she faced them bravely, never allowing her husband and brother-in-law to guess how much they hurt her delicate constitution At night, wild animals roamed around them, demanding of the exiles great cunning and guile to keep them at bay

One day Lakshman was stung by a poisonous snake, and they wept over him thinking he would surely die great was his agony But just then, a *muni* passed who had in his basket a cure for snake-bite, made from certain herbs He saved the lad's life, and blessing them passed on

And so the days wore on, hazardous and risky, but the power of the Almighty was with them constantly, so

that no untoward happening was allowed to touch them deeply

After some time, fearing that Bharata might seek him out again to urge him to return to Ayodhya Rama with Sita and Lakshman moved further southwards into deeper jungles forsaking the glades of Chitraluta. Wherever they passed on their journey to the south saints and sages received them with open arms offering them the simple hospitality of their hermitages which the royal exiles accepted with pleasure.

Now it chanced one evening as they were upon the road the beautiful Sita was walking between the two brothers, when a fierce *Rakshasa* stood in their way, blocking their passage. With horrible blood-shot eyes the fiend drank in the beauty of Sita, looking at her lustfully.

Out of our way, fiend!" cried Rama angrily. The next moment, however, the *Rakshasa* pounced upon Sita attempting to carry her off. But the heroic brothers jumped upon him quickly, Lakshman slaying the wretch. Rama snatched the fainting Sita out of his fell grasp. Swooning with terror, Sita fell senseless to the ground until she was revived by Rama and Lakshman. The three then continued on their way.

In time they reached the Vindhya range of mountains which presented at first an insurmountable insuperable barrier to the royal pilgrims' progress owing to Sita's presence. But Sita herself was determined she would not be a hindrance to their forward advance. By a prodigious effort, she scaled the steep mountain supported by her gallant husband and brother.

When they had descended the range the royal exiles wandered over the Deccan plateau living the life of nomadic gipsies, moving from one location to another as fancy took them. At last they came to Panchavati at the source of the river Godavari.

"What a lovely place!" exclaimed Sita, rising upon the vast green meadows of Panchavati under the shade

of a spreading *limra* tree "I should love to settle down here I am so tired of travelling all the time!"

"Very well, dear heart, thou shalt," replied Rama fondly "We shall build thee a cottage wherever thou sayest"

Happy Sita then led the brothers to a place near a waterfall, whose rushing waters sounded musically upon their ears

There the royal brethren, with their bare hands, built for lovely Sita a little dream house, humble and small though it was

Then one fine day, when it was ready, Sita moved into it, happy as a lark Rama and Lakshman brought wood from the jungle, and patiently hewed it into pieces of furniture for their needs Whilst in the little garden, under Sita's loving care, shrubs and fragrant flowering plants sprang up, as though at the touch of a divine hand The little abode soon presented a picturesque front to the world

Hermits and travellers paused in their tracks to admire the lovely garden ablaze with colourful flowers, being invariably drawn to the little homestead wherein dwell such perfect love and accord and peace

And so time rolled over their heads Thirteen years went past in which they lived in perfect contentment and tranquillity, the even tenor of their lives unmarred by any untoward happening

Pilgrims and wanderers, however, were not the only ones that gazed upon that little abode of love An evil *Rakshasa* woman also looked upon the pleasant dwelling and was filled with jealousy when she beheld the handsome and god-like Rama, on whom she cast eyes of lust love

One evening Rama and Sita were sitting together before their cottage, when a beautiful young woman suddenly emerged from out of the shadows and stood before them

"Who art thou, O noble and lofty one?" she questioned

gazing at Rama with her bold dark eyes

"I am Rama, the son of Dasaratha, who dwell here in exile with my wife Sita, and my brother Lakshman" replied Rama courteously "But who art thou that dost wander about in the darkness all alone?"

"I am Surpanakha, the sister of Ravana" answered the fair one "And I have come hither because I love thee madly and have chosen thee for my husband. Thou shalt rule over my mighty empire and sit upon a throne of gold. Leave this sallow-faced Sita of thine and come with me. She is ugly and unworthy of thy heavenly beauty."

"Foolish maiden," answered Rama blushing with shame at her words, "thinkest thou to distract me with thy beauty? I am wedded, and love my beautiful beloved Sita more than my own life. No power on earth or heaven could make me part from her. So seal the love of my younger brother Lakshman who is a bachelor."

The demon-maid,—for so it was, disguised as a beautiful young woman—gnashed her teeth in disappointment and rage. She next tried to flirt with Lakshman but when he laughed at her predatory attempts to make love to him she soon revealed herself in her true colours. Hearing Sita likewise laughing at her softly, she became doubly enraged at the rejection of her unholy love. Her face ablaze with fury she flew at Sita, raving and ranting like a mad woman.

"Be gone!" she shrieked "Or thou wilt rue the day, thou cad-heron! Thou hast dared the fury of Surpanakha, great Ravana's sister, who can drink the life-blood of a god!"

Cent's Sita shrank in fear against her husband, terrified to see a monstrous and demon-faced shape, with long claws that spread their tentacles at her, in place of the beautiful maiden. Lakshman rushed upon her with lightning swiftness, amazed to see the soft cooling creature of a few moments ago transformed into a gorgon that looked like a raven's

wolf

With his sword he hacked at the fierce creature, who flew into the air at the attack, frenzied and furlous her face taking on horrible contortions, as she shook her claws at him menacingly. Screeching and hooting in pain and fury, she fled towards Janasthana, her brotne's capital, where she poured out a tale of insults and injuries into her kinsmen's ears, showing her bleeding face and figure to the demon lords.

"Only a Celestial could wound thee like this!" wrathfully exclaimed her brother Khara. "I shall drink Indra's blood for this deed!"

Surpanakha then related who had attacked her and why.

"They attacked me because I wanted to drink the life-blood of their Sita," said she vengefully. "Oh, bring her to me now, I pray you!"

"We shall have them all captured" promised her brother. And forthwith he commanded the Demon Lords to capture the three royal hermits who dwelt in the jungle near Panchavati. Accompanied by Surpanakha, they hastened away, anxious to avenge themselves on the two mighty brothers.

When Rama saw the demon host swooping down upon him, he left Sita in the care of Lakshman, and himself took them on single-handed. One by one, he smote them all down with his bow, until none remained except Surpanakha who went wailing back with a tale of woe.

Then calling his brother Dushina Khara instructed him to collect an army of fourteen thousand *Rakshases*.

"For to-day I will kill this hateful Rama!" he exclaimed viciously.

CHAPTER XII

MANY WERE THE evil signs and portents that preceded the coming of the great *Rakshasa* army against Rama. Jackals howled dismally, the sky was on fire, crows and kites screeched sharply at dawn like harbingers of evil tidings. A headless shape in soldier's armour emitting blood, appeared for a moment in the skies, whilst Rahu tried to devour the Sun, causing an eclipse that shrouded the earth in dismal darkness. Rama saw the ominous signs, and was quick to realise their dark portent.

"Quick, Lakshman," said he urgently. "Take Sita to the secret hide-out in the mountains and stay with her until all danger is past. On no account leave her alone in the cave—I shall fight these demons alone."

Sita tremblingly bade her husband adieu and victory in battle, then hastened away with Lakshman to the cave in the thickly-wooded mountains which was to be their refuge. Inside the cave, Sita fell upon her knees, imploring the Almighty to keep her husband safe and alive.

"Dear Vishnu Lord," she prayed. "Grant victory to my dearest husband. Let not harm come to him, O Lord!"

Rama, meanwhile, clad in his suit of armour, and armed with his mighty bow and celestial arrows, waited for his enemies. At last the *Rakshasas* came on, led by Khara in a chariot. Like unto black clouds in a roaring tempest, they rushed towards Rama, who stood like a rock,—unflinching, magnificent, invincible.

Thousands upon thousands of arrows were emitted upon Rama, who returned them with flaming darts that spread like wildfire among the *Rakshasa* host, maiming and slaving and wounding them fatally, causing panic and confusion among the enemy ranks. But Khara and his brother obstinately stood their ground, offering resistance to the last. Then Rama seized a mighty

weapon of the gods, wielding it with potent force, smiting down the enemy,—first the leaders, Khara and Dushana and then the rabble, till only Surpanakha remained to repeat the tale of dire defeat and death at the hands of Rama

Infuriated like a bull at the news of his brother's slaughter, and the routing of his entire army, the ten-headed Ravana decided to go into the fray himself to avenge his kinsmen's death. But Surpanakha warned him of Rama's invincibility in war.

"Take care, brother," she wailed. "This Rama is unconquerable in battle! But perhaps cunning can do it. He has a wife whom he loves madly. Only if she is captured can he be slain. For he cannot live without her."

"Then she shall be captured this day," resolutely declared Ravana.

On the following day, Ravana and his kinsman Maricha went towards Panchavati in a chariot drawn by asses with the heads of *Rakshasas*. When they arrived Ravana put into execution a scheme of vile and diabolical cunning, to decoy Rama and Lakshman away from Sita and so to capture the helpless creature.

Maricha was sent to graze upon the grass at the hermitage of the royal exiles, in the shape of a beautiful golden stag with soft eyes and silver-tipped horns. When Sita came out of her cottage to gather wild flowers with which to deck herself and her home, she was so struck by the beauty of the stag, that she called to Rama and Lakshman to come and admire it.

"What a lovely stag!" exclaimed Sita enthusiastically. "Oh how I should love to sit on its golden mane!"

"Then thou shalt do so, fairest," promptly replied Rama, and away he went with his bow and arrow slung across his shoulder to bag the desired stag bidding Lakshman look after Sita while he was absent.

When Rama had been gone some time Lakshman became uneasy, for he recalled tales of *Rakshasas* who

took the form of deer to deceive and decoy travellers away

Rama meantime hunted high and low for the elusive animal before he finally succeeded in tracking him down, and putting an arrow through his heart. In an agony of pain, Maricha jumped out from the deer's body, to the great surprise of Rama who perceived that he had killed not a beautiful deer, but a *Rakshasa* with horrible, leering visage. Though in the throes of death, Maricha mimicked Rama's voice, crying loudly

'Oh Sita, Sita! Lakshman! Save me!—Save me!—I am dying'

When Sita heard the cry, she grew pale and frantic, and hysterically appealed to Lakshman to go to his brother's aid

'Hurry! Hurry! Help Rama,—he is dying!' she cried, her eyes wild with grief and alarm

But Lakshman sought to calm her

'Nay, Sita, do not be afraid,' he said. 'Rama can never be hurt by *Rakshasas*. That was not Rama's voice, but demons imitating him, believe me—I cannot possibly leave thee, for Rama entrusted thee to my care'

But Sita would not be soothed. She stormed and raved and ranted against Lakshman for not going to his brother's aid at once

'Art thou mad?' she cried, beside herself with fear and anxiety. 'What art thou waiting for? Thy brother is in danger and peril of his life, and yet thou standest there staring! Dost thou care for him no more,—or must I think that thou didst follow him to the forest, waiting for him to die, so that thou couldst get his reward? Have no such hope! I shall destroy myself once if anything happens to Rama!—Go, go, thou faithless one!—It is no use waiting here!'

Sita's words lashed at Lakshman like a whip. Covering his face with his hands, he sobbed aloud, for his heart was free from the stain of sin

'Oh, Sita, Sita, thou knowest not what thou sayest!'

he cried "Thou art as a sister and a mother unto me. How could I have such a thought in my heart? Thou knowest not how deeply thou hast wounded me!—Wouldst thou, O wanton one set brother against brother?"

Sita was all contrition and remorse when she heard Lakshman's words

"Oh, forgive me, I know not what I say!" she entreated. "But I beseech thee, upon my bended knees, go to Rama at once! He needs thy help!"

At length Lakshman gave in to her pleadings, and went to Rama's aid, invoking the spirits of the forest to protect Sita during his absence

The moment Sita was left unprotected Ravana seized his opportunity. Assuming the form of a saintly sage, he directed his footsteps towards the hermitage where Sita sat anxious and wide-eyed, waiting in suspense for Rama and Lakshman to return. When Ravana saw the beautiful Sita, he was filled with desire and longing to possess her

"O beautiful one, who art as lovely as the Poonam moon," he cried, approaching her with the demeanour of a jungle saint, "what dost thou here alone in the forest? Art thou perchance Sri or Gauri or mayhap a nymph of heaven, or the goddess of love and beauty? Thy place is not in the jungle, fair one, but rather in the palace of a great king. Who is thy sire, O shy and beautiful one?"

Mistaking him for a Brahmin, Sita explained to Ravana how she came to be there and who she was

"If you will wait here," said she courteously, "my husband and brother-in-law will be glad to greet you on their return."

"I am no Brahmin," said Ravana, revealing his identity at last, "but the King of the *Rakshasas*,—Ravana,—whom the gods themselves dread and fear. I love thee, O beautiful one and wouldst make thee my chief queen. Come with me and share my glory and empire. Thou shalt have five thousand maids to wait upon thee here."

and foot”

Sita's eyes flashed fire and cold steel at Ravana's words. Raising herself to her full stature, she regarded him with loathing and contempt.

“Despicable wretch!” she exclaimed disdainfully. “Knowest thou who I am? Hast thou heard of Rama, the peerless, matchless, invincible, unconquerable hero, who knows not the meaning of defeat? I am his lawful and wedded wife! Darest thou, thou loathsome, vile, wolfish beast, to woo the wife of so mighty a hero? First endeavour to uproot a mountain, seize the stars, or swallow the ocean, before thou dost attempt to capture or court the wife of Rama the lion, who will tear thee into little pieces if thou wilt dare to touch me, thou contemptible jungle prowler!”

Stung to the quick by the biting sarcasm of Sita's words, Ravana boasted vainly of his strength and power.

“Thou knowest not how mighty and heroic I am,” he bragged. “Gods and men quail before me, and I have full power over Yama, the God of Death.”

When he had said this, he assumed his original size and shape, standing before Sita like a giant with ten ugly heads and twenty gnarled arms. Sita screamed with terror at the horrifying transformation, but Ravana laughed at her triumphantly. Seizing her, he placed her in his chariot, and drove off into the atmosphere with the swiftness of a bird.

Poor Sita screamed for Rama and Lakshman to come to her aid. Alas! They heard her not! But a vulture named Jatayu, asleep on the top of a mountain, heard her cries, and rushed upon Ravana, attacking him fiercely. Valiantly the vulture fought to save Sita, breaking the chariot in two, and killing the asses that drove it. But Ravana took Sita in his great hairy arms, and wounding Jatayu with his sword, he soared through the air bearing the screaming Sita away to his island fortress of Lanka.

When they were passing over the Mountain of Apes,

Sita retained her presence of mind enough to drop her jewels, which fell through the air like shooting stars and were found by the apes, who surmised that Ravana was kidnapping a beautiful woman whom they heard calling upon Rama and Lakshman to come and help her.

Arrived at his palace in Lanka, Ravana placed Sita in charge of a band of *Rakshasa* women, who were ordered to guard her day and night with scrupulous care.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN RAMA RETURNED to the cottage to find it empty and dark his despair and grief knew no bounds. In vain he cried out his Sita's name to the hills and valleys around though he knew well his beloved had been carried away. But whither?—whither?—Alas! he knew not. In his frenzy he rushed hither and thither through the forest like a lost creature, followed by faithful Lakshman.

At last he stumbled upon a withered garland which Sita had worn that day, but the sight of it evoked such overpowering grief and agony that he fainted away until Lakshman revived him.

"My dear brother," begged Lakshman. "Do not give way to grief so. Take heart,—we will find her yet."

"Oh, Lakshman!" lamented Rama. "Sita is lost!—lost! How can I live without her,—she who did follow me even to the jungles! She is gone, gone!—alas! Life is bitter without her, O Lakshman!"

"Come, arise, let us search," said Lakshman encouragingly. Together, they scoured the entire countryside around but to no avail. Darkness made their task more difficult, until a young moon arose to lend its pale light to their heart-breaking search. Once Rama espied a lotus blossom that grew in a pond, and mistook it for Sita's lovely face.

"What thou heartless one!" he exclaimed. "Art thou

aiding from me? Art thou trying to test my love? Hast thou ever found it wanting?"

Keen as a razor's edge was his disappointment, when he found it was but a flower he beheld, not fair Sita's winsome face. He gave way to a passion of tears and was led gently away by Lakshman. They returned to the hermitage, but found it desolate and bleak as before. In the moonlight before the cottage, Rama beat his breasts, and wailed like a soul in hell torment. All night long he wandered through the jungles in quest of his lost mate, the moon-lit shadows creating illusions, until Rama's fevered mind conjured up the face of Sita peeping from behind every tree, and he beheld her elusive form vanishing before his gaze a thousand times over.

"Sita!—Sita!—Sita!" the long despairing cry reverberated dismally through the jungles until the dawn.

The next morning, weary after the night-long vigil, the brothers started out once more upon their fruitless search, until at length their dogged foot-steps led them to a deep valley between two hills where Jatayu, the vulture, lay torn and mangled and bleeding. With his last breath, the gallant bird told them how ten-headed Ravana had borne the screaming Sita away towards the south,—how he had sought in vain to rescue her. Then the vulture died in Rama's arms, his soul ascending into Vishnu's heaven. Rama and Lakshman then proceeded southwards according to the clue provided by Jatayu.

On their way, they were confronted by a black demon of monstrous size, with misshapen, deformed body, and one eye. The brethren fought the monster who had wound his two great arms around them, until he fell prostrate upon the ground. As he was dying, he told the brothers that he was Kabandha, a *Gandharva* who had been placed under evil spells. If they burnt his body, he said, he would be rid of his demon form, and could give them information regarding Sita. As requested, Rama and Lakshman lighted a pyre, and burnt the monster.

Lol out of the flames rose the *Gandharva*, Kabandha who told them that Ravana, who was the King of the *Rakshasas*, dwelt in the island fortress of Lanka,—that if they wished to conquer him, they should form an alliance with Sugriva, the Ape King, who lived in the *Rishyamukha* mountain, among the Nilgiris

Thankful for the information and advice vouchsafed to them by the *Gandharva* spirit, Rama and Lakshman travelled southwards until they arrived at the lovely range of the Nilgiri hills. When they sought out Sugriva, the Ape King, the latter confirmed that a beautiful woman had indeed been carried away in the arms of Ravana, who had called upon Rama and Lakshman to come to her aid. Then the ornaments that Sita had dropped in her flight were produced for identification. Rama was unable to see them for his tears, but Lakshman recognised them instantly as Sita's.

Then Rama and Lakshman made a strong alliance with Sugriva, whereby they promised to restore him to his kingdom, which had been usurped by his half-brother Bali, whilst he, in turn, promised to send his armies in search of that pearl among princesses, beautiful Sita.

* * *

And what of Sita, surrounded by a fearsome band of gorguesque, gargantuan guards? Time and again during her agonising incarceration within the palace walls did the hateful, repulsive Ravana impose upon her the odium of his presence, approaching her with sweet speeches and words of love, that from his mouth stank foul and foetid and fulsome. With withering glance and cold contempt, Sita scorned him into silence her purity and virtue protecting her strongly against his evil designs.

When Ravana failed miserably to break down Sita's icy reserve, he tried other methods by which he hoped to possess her. He summoned the demon dragons who guarded her and commanded them to take her to the beautiful *acoka* grove without the city.

"Give her beautiful clothes and priceless jewels to deck herself with. Ply her with delicious fruits and palatable meals. Always praise me before her, and tell her, a horrible fate awaits her unless she consents to wed me," he instructed them.

But soon the demon maids reported dismal failure. Sita wept copiously by night and by day, lamenting her loved one, threw away the clothes and jewellery from her as though they were noxious serpents, refused to eat, and stopped her ears, or screamed at mention of Ravana's name.

At last a ray of hope shone through Sita's citadel of dark despair. Hanuman, the general of Sugriva's armies, discovered her sitting pale and silent in the *asoka* grove, a gentle lamb among devouring she-wolves.

He bided his time until the demon maids grew drowsy, then approached Sita from behind a tree, showing her the ring that Rama had sent as a token of recognition. Overjoyed, Sita bathed the ring with her tears, listening with eager face to her beloved's message of love. Quickly she tore from her neck the locket she wore, and handed it to Hanuman, requesting him to give it to Rama as a token of her life-long love and fidelity, and informing him that Ravana had given her two months to live, unless she gave in to his vile desires.

Hanuman hastened away to carry the good tidings to Rama, but not before he had done considerable damage to life and property, slaying numerous demon guards, and setting fire to Lanka before he returned from the fray, escaping quickly over the ocean.

Rama's joy and relief were boundless on hearing that his Sita had been found safe and alive. His fingers closed convulsively upon the locket she had sent.

"Dearly beloved, soul of my soul, I come to thee!" he swore under his breath, looking down at the locket.

Preparations were immediately begun for the rescue of Sita. Rama and Lakshman began their march southwards, with the monkey-hosts swarming behind them in

their thousands When they reached the shores of the ocean they were joined by an unexpected ally, Bibhishana, the younger brother of Ravana, who alone of all the *Rakshasas* had stood in opposition against his brother, in favour of Rama Then with the help of the Vanar chief Nala the son of a divine artisan, a causeway was speedily constructed across the strait, separating the mainland from the island Over this bridge went Rama's hordes to storm Lanka's capital, shouting slogans of victory

Before the city walls Rama encamped the vast armies led by himself, Lakshman, and Sugriva Soon the *Rakshasa* hosts came forth to attack the apes, led by Indrajit, the son of Ravana, with horns blowing and trumpets beating, riding on elephants lions and tigers camels, asses and hogs, wolves, hyenas, and wild boars A roaring, surging, bellowing mass like to black thunder they came, wielding bows and arrows, maces and spear-knives and swords, and weapons of magic

Soon a battle royal raged between Demons and Apes, their piercing battle-cries resounding through the air, and reaching high heaven itself Great trees were felled to the ground by the gigantic apes who wielded them for clubs, immense rocks and boulders were broken into splinters as giant monkey paws hurled them at the demons, sharp monkey-claws inflicted grievous wounds, elephants, loud-trumpeting and war-frenzied ran amuck among the invading monkey-hosts who, in turn rushed upon the demons, shouting "Rama! Rama!" Headless trunks, and twisted, tortured bodies writhing in pain swam in a gore of blood that ran in rivulets streaming forth in all directions

From high towers fair Sita watched the strife with her heart in her mouth,—the strife occasioned by the lusts and filthy lusts that her pure and heavenly beauty had excited As Sita watched in feverish anxiety, she thought she saw her Rama's head struck off and swooned in despair but revived to hear that Rama lived It had been but an illusion of her over-disturbed brain The

her sudden sorrow was turned into sudden joy, as she thought with shame and wonderment "How could I live, while thinking him dead?"

At a certain point in the struggle, the apes appeared to be having the worst of it, though Rama had full faith in their heroism and courage to carry the day. Sugriva then flung a great tree upon Indrajit, breaking his chariot, and making him flee for life together with his army, which was scattered in confusion. Indrajit, however, returned to throw a deadly serpent-noose around Rama and Lakshman, which bound and paralysed the two mighty brethren, until Garuda, the Bird of Heaven, flew down and loosed it. The momentary danger was thus past.

CHAPTER XIV

AT LAST RAVANA himself came forth to battle, but when Rama with his sharp arrows swept the ten proud crowns from his ten hideous heads, he retired in shame and wrath, locking himself up in his palace and skulking.

For some time, the unfortunate *Rakshasas* had to shift for themselves without any adequate leadership, until someone thought of awakening Kumbha-karna, the brother of Ravana. The mightiest of the demons, a fiend who in his time had devoured hundreds of human beings, he had been put to sleep forever by Brahma, who ordained that he should awaken for a day only, once every six months.

The *Rakshasas* danced and sang and shouted in his slumbering ear in an attempt to awaken him, but in vain. They made elephants walk over his giant body but he slept through it all. Then they brought beautiful women who made love to him. The trick succeeded. He woke up at last but swore like thunder to be disturbed. "What means this rude disturbance?" he roared.

"Can't a body rest in peace?"

The *Rakshasas* then explained to him how a gorgeous meal of fine, fleshy apes awaited him if he cared to taste it. On his consenting, they brought him many swine and boars and human beings, and barrels of spirituous wine, all of which he consumed in a few minutes. This being merely an appetizer to whet his appetite, he was then ready for the main dish.

"Where are the apes?" he asked, smacking his large lips.

When the monkey-hosts beheld the monster, they fled in panic, but soon returned, rallying their forces under Sugriva, to fling great boulders and trees against him, though they left him with hardly a scratch. Hundreds of shrieking apes were devoured by Kumbha-karna before Rama faced him in single combat.

Laughing with a thunderous roar, his mighty bulging shaking like a mountain convulsed by an earthquake, Kumbha-karna made ready to devour Rama also, but the hero discharged a shower of flinty arrows that laid low the slothful and well-fed monster at last. Staggering heavily, he fell backward into the sea.

"Too well didst thou love to sleep, mine enemy," murmured Rama. "Now sleep forever for thou wert disturbed before thy time in an unlucky hour."

After the unexpected destruction of Kumbha-karna, the frightened *Rakshasas* were reduced to desperate straits. Indrajit came forth once more to avenge his uncle but was struck down by Lakshman's unerring aim falling headless upon the field. Then was Ravana's heart cleft in two and great was his sorrow at the death of his son. For some time he gave himself up to weeping and lamenting. Then he arose, resolved upon revenge. With dark thoughts brooding in his barbarous breast, he rushed in search of Sita, intent upon killing her. But the women guards hid her away, while they persuaded him not to sully his reputation by murdering a woman. Fiercely, he thrust them aside, looking for Sita, but

finding her, he went away at last, brooding upon his wrongs. Then he came forth from the palace to fight once more, followed by a great army of young demon heroes.

When he saw his brother Bibhishana fighting in Rama's ranks, Ravana was seized with rage and fury.

"Traitor!" he called angrily. "Take that!" and he flung at Bibhishana a great weapon which Lakshman adroitly intercepted in mid-air.

"Murderer of my son, thou hast saved Bibhishana's life!" grimly exclaimed Ravana. "Now save thine own, if thou canst!" So saying, he hurled at Lakshman a deadly spear which pinned him to the ground, helpless. Rama's mighty heart was broken in two, but Hanuman, the loyal, went by night to bring medicinal herbs with which Lakshman's wound was soon healed, and the hero recovered completely.

The next morning, Ravana came forth in battle fury, rejoicing that he had made short work of Lakshman, (unaware of his recovery overnight), and hoping to do likewise with Rama.

"This day will see Rama dead,—or Ravana!" he swore determinedly. "The *Rakshasa* dames have prophesied that I shall be covered with glory on this auspicious ammas day. Be it so!"

Confidently Ravana drove up to where the immortal hero stood in the chariot of Indra, attired in the coat-of-mail of the great god. The two looked at each other for a moment with hatred in their eyes, then locked in deadly battle. Their mighty duel the two great foes fought out alone, unhampered by their hosts. Base Ravana's many arms and legs and necks and heads made him appear as though he were surrounded by so many kinsmen.

Each met his match in the long and arduous struggle in which now one side, and now the other, seemed to gain the upper hand. Gods and men, *Rakshasas* and monkeys, looked on with bated breath, as the fierce

battle raged, the fortunes of war lying equally in the balance between the two great foes

Ravana drove an arrow deep into the throbbing right arm of Rama, who struggled vallantly to redeem his beautiful Sita from her prisoned cage of despair and dishonour. Rama then shot an arrow which pierced Ravana's breast but each obstinately stood his ground striving for supremacy, as, amid the rapid interchange of blows, no decisive victory was won by either

At last, becoming impatient, Ravana flung at his foe an iron-studded mace which Rama with skilful dart intercepted in mid-air, breaking it into two destroying once more the hopes of the *Rakshasas*. Then swift as lightning, Rama darted forward, laid to his bow a matchless, flaming arrow, Brahma-created, which was destined to lay low the *Rakshasa* menace forever. With unerring aim he discharged it. Like a meteor that bursts in the atmosphere, it flashed through the air then, in a trice, smote off, as though by magic all the ten heads of Ravana.

Bellowing with the fury and volume of a hundred bulls the enemy of the gods staggered heavily backward and fell at last, lifeless upon the ground.

Upon Rama's godly head, which was soon to wear the kingly crown, there fell a shower of celestial flowers whilst a heavenly voice reached down to the earth saying

"Immortal Hero,—peerless one—Victor of Truth and Justice, thou hast well accomplished thy task. In thee I am well pleased."

Fate's decree and the gods' long-desired mandate were fulfilled at last. Peerless Rama had freed the three worlds of the curse of Ravana.

Amidst the cheers of the ape, Rama entered the city in triumph to free his long-lost Sita from her palatine prison. She was brought forth upon a palanquin to the unreserved joy and delight of the monkeys, who surrounded her on all sides jabbering incessantly. Grace

ously Sita acknowledged their cheers, smiling sweetly at the apes who had fought so gallantly on her behalf

Then husband and wife were united once more With tears of joy, Sita clung to Rama, her soul-searing agony of separation and suspense over at last

"Oh, my dearest husband!" cried Sita, when they were alone "I have remained true and faithful to thee always But if thou didst doubt my innocence and chastity, then would I rather die!"

Rama was silent for a moment, as he gazed down at the ground, for a conflict raged in his soul at the thought that Sita had dwelt in Ravana's house

"Nay, dearly beloved," he replied thoughtfully "I do not doubt thy virtue or innocence, but I fear evil tongues will wag, because thou hast sojourned so long in the house of the *Rakshasa* king"

Sita blanched at these words of her husband Forthwith she ordered Lakshman to build her a fire for she wished to end her unhappiness and grief in its purifying flames

"Build me a fire, so that I may die in it," said she resolutely "For I cannot live to bring shame to my Rama's peerless head"

Rama wept, but was powerless to resist her will Solemnly Sita invoked Agni, the God of Fire, before she leapt into the flames

"O pure and holy flame!" she cried "If in word and deed I have been faithless to my virtue, disloyal to my duty, and untrue to my name, then may the world calumniate me But if not, then protect my honour, O pure and holy light, by testifying to my purity and sinlessness"

Then, looking pale and resolved, Sita leapt into the fire whilst all grieved around her

"Oh, woe the day!" lamented Rama remorsefully "O grievous sin that I have committed My victory is in vain, for she for whom it was won has vanished from my sight forever Oh dear and holy one, I doubted thee

not for a moment! Alas!—"Tis too late to recall her!"

But even as Rama wept, the flames of the fire into which Sita had vanished, parted in the middle to reveal her white and radiant form untouched and unharmed by the flames

"Take back unto thee thy wife, O Rama, for she is free from sin or blame," said a Voice

Great was Rama's wonder and ecstasy at thus finding Sita unscathed and alive Fondly and rapturously he folded her to his bosom, tears of joy in his eyes

After placing Bibhishana upon the throne of Lanka Rama and Sita entered the resplendent car of Indra and followed by Lakshman and Hanuman, sped joyfully towards Ayodhya, homeward bound at last

CHAPTER XV

THE RADIANT PAIR moved through the air as though borne on fairy wings, drinking in the beauty of the variegated landscape as it flew past under them

"Look, dearest," said Rama "There is the bridge that my monkey-hosts built across the seas, that I might come to thee with speed See those sparkling waves that glitter in the sun like diamonds Now the ocean vanishes from our sight,—the green earth disappears below us We are at the moment flying in the celestial spheres, now among the fleecy clouds, now winning the way of the birds Ah what a heavenly breeze blows from the skies, cooled by the waters of the earth

"Canst thou see those saffron-robed hermits once again building their sanctuaries in the Dandaka forest, now free from the curse of the *Rakshasas*?—Oh, this was the grove in which I sought thee beloved and tried to find thy tattered garland torn from thy sweet neck These sad pitying creepers were bent down with grief for the dear one, but the gentle deer looked southward

silence to show the way thou hadst gone The heavens did shed tears for loss of thee, sweetheart Bereft of thee, neither the scent of flowers, nor the songs of birds held any charm for me any more Wistfully I gazed upon the *chakravaka* birds, so happy in their love, as they tenderly exchanged lotus-blossoms, whilst thou, my Love, were so cruelly and brutally wrenched from me!

Rama's fists clenched as his mind dwelt upon the dark days of his despair and grief

"In vain did I embrace an asoka tree in my arms, imagining it was thee!" he continued in introspective vein "There is our blessed grove, love, where thou didst carefully water the mango tree and tend the gentle deer Oh, the happiness of those heavenly, love-lit days!—Dost recall those enchanted evenings, sweet, when wornout by the chase, I didst rest my weary head against thy soft bosom, and thou didst sing to me with thy voice of entrancing sweetness, beside our hut built of reeds? 'Twas Paradise on earth to dwell with thee in the forest, beloved!

"In that spot down there, they say Saint Agastya of old used to dwell, and there he lit the holy altar-fires My spirit doth joy in inhaling the fragrant scented smoke rising up to meet our car

"Fair one, canst thou see that gleaming lake down there? 'Tis called 'Five Nymphs' Men say the ascetic Sataharni lived upon its shores, in company with the deer, eating naught but Darbha grass, until Indra growing jealous of his austerities, sent five heavenly nymphs to tempt him from his purpose

"And below there, lives Sutikshna, in the blaze and heat of raging fires, and under the scorching, burning sun Indra sent *him* bright-eyed nymphs, too, but he would have none of them, with their sweet smiles and charming wiles! He lives in complete silence, with his gaze fixed upon the sun

"See, Sita, how stately rises Chitrakuta's peak into the sky, with the silvery cascades flowing down its sides

There at its base lies the Mandakini river. Near the mountain blossoms the tall Tamala, whose fragrant flowers once decked thy beauty, remember?"

Happy and excited as a school-boy on a spree, his mood of sadness now completely dispelled. Rama chattered gaily all the while, pointing out to Sita places of interest or beauty as she avidly hung upon his words, divinely happy to be by his side once more.

Ah now the moon's bright face shines through the clouds like thine, my peerless one! — Look down where the holy Ganga rolls on, joined by the Jamuna. They say that those mortals who leave the earth after having bathed in the holy waters of these two great rivers, even if they know not the Soul Supreme, will never more return to earth.

"And now at last! — lo and behold the beautiful city down there, — there where I gave up the *Raj* to go into the jungles, and Kalkeyi rejoiced to have her will."

'The great river Sarayu which the wise deem had its source in Brahma's lake, now comes into view. What a noble river it is! See how it washes the walls of our beloved Ayodhya, our own fair capital. It rejoices my heart to look upon it once more after so long.

"What, thinkest thou, are those clouds of dust that rise up in the air towards us? — Methinks Bharata has heard of our coming, and comes forth with his armies to meet us. My princely brother has kept my father's kingdom for me in trust all these long years and now restores it unto me unharmed. — Look Sita, there he is in hermit's bark, coming on foot to greet me. In loyalty to me he has refused to take unto himself his fair wife Lakshmi all these long years, — refused to taste the joys of conjugal bliss — my noble brother!"

The next moment the heavenly car glided down to earth, watched by the hosts below. Lithely Rama clambered down followed by Sita and Lakshman and affectionately embraced his brother. Next he greeted his ministers of old, now grown grey and old.

When Rama entered his capital city in triumph, Bharata placed before his feet the golden sandals which had been invested with the royal authority

"These are the symbols of thy rule, Rama I return to thee thy crown and thy kingdom, which I have guarded for thee during thy exile Receive, therefore, what is thine own"

One of the first duties that Rama and Lakshman performed on arriving at Ayodhya, was to visit their widowed mothers The heroes clasped the weeping Queen-mothers in their arms after bowing before them Then Sita bowed down at the feet of Rama's mother

"Sita returns to you, mother," said she in a trembling voice "But alas! she is inauspicious to her lord, and unworthy of all honour"

But raising her up gently, Kausalya embraced her tenderly

"Dear child, arise," said she "'Twas thy sacred and holy love that brought thy dear lord unscathed through the ravages of battle"

Then upon the morrow, Rama was crowned amidst the tumultuous rejoicings of the people who went mad with joy to welcome him back to the kingdom after the years of bitter exile

Solemn and splendid were the ceremonies of consecration and coronation of Raghu's great son the heroic and godly Rama From jars of unalloyed gold, the holy waters from the sacred rivers were poured upon his head Dressed in resplendent robes of state and followed by his counsellors, loyal allies, and courtiers, Rama passed under mighty arches to the palace of his sires-being showered with rice all the way, as the people hailed him clamorously

In his golden car of state, the Hero-king sat, dignified and stately, flanked by Lakshman and Bharata who appeared no whit less regal in bearing than Lingly Rama Next in the procession came radiant Sita, the Queen, borne upon a splendid palanquin, her classic

There at its base lies the Mandakini river Near the mountain blossoms the tall Tamala, whose fragrant flowers once decked thy beauty, remember?"

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In his golden car of state, the Hero-king sat, dignified and stately, flanked by Lakshman and Bharata who appeared no whit less regal in bearing than kingly Rama. Next in the procession came radiant Sita the Queen, borne upon a splendid palanquin, her classic

beauty enhanced by her magnificent robe of yellow and gold brocade whilst gems of priceless worth shed lustre and glory upon her pure and flawless loveliness

At last Rama was crowned king, and sat upon his rightful throne, and there began for his kingdom a reign of peace and prosperity. As a father he ruled his people putting his subjects' weal before his own. In his personal life, Rama knew perfect bliss, for with so peerless a wife as Sita, there could be no discord or disharmony. Sweet Sita grew fairer each day as her joys multiplied, whilst the memory of her sorrows grew dim and paled into insignificance.

Smiling mysteriously, she brought her lord even greater joy, when one day she showed signs of becoming a mother. Her beauty shone with a new softness and beatitude, an expression of almost divine radiance lighting up her delicate countenance. With tender solicitude, her husband cared for her, commanding her maidens to grant her all she craved to eat or drink or wear.

"Dearest," asked Rama, pressing his beloved wife to his heart, "is there aught that thou dost long for, which has not been granted unto thee?"

Sita flushed with pleasure and happiness at her husband's anxiety and care for her well-being.

"Dear Rama," she answered "I should love to visit the hermits' huts on the river Godavari, where the cattle roam lazily in the long luxuriant grass, and all around is such heavenly peace and tranquillity."

"Thou shalt, dearest," declared Rama. "Why didst thou not mention it before?" Little did Sita realise under what tragic circumstances her heart's desire was to be gratified.

CHAPTER XVI

UPON THE MORROW, taking an attendant with him, Rama climbed up to his palace terrace, from where he feasted his eyes upon the fair city of Ayodhya. With pride and happiness he looked down upon the crowded streets, the busy market-place, the lovely parks in which the citizens relaxed, the river Sarayu that washed the city walls, — and was well content at the prosperity of his people. On an impulse, he turned to the squire who accompanied him.

"Tell me," he asked whimsically, "What do the people say about their king? Are they satisfied with him, or is there aught that he has done, — or not done, — that does not meet with their approval?"

The squire prevaricated for a while, evading an immediate reply. But when the King pressed him, he blurted out the truth at last.

"Sire," he stammered, "You have indeed done everything in your power to increase the happiness and welfare of your subjects. But — But there is one thing —"

"And that is —"

"—— that Your Majesty received the Queen back after she had sojourned so long in Ravana's palace!"

Rama winced as though an arrow had been tilted against his heart. Passionately he turned upon the man, lashing at him with fury. Hot searing words in defence of his pure, loyal, loving Sita tumbled out of his mouth in a rush, until realising that he had forced the man to speak he apologised for his temper, and dismissed him abruptly.

For hours Rama stood upon the terrace, his mind in a ferment. The horror of the slanderous calumny the man's words had insinuated against his innocent and

sinless Sita, weighed heavily upon his spirit for never had a scandalous word stained or sullied the honour of his high-born race

For days a fierce conflict raged within Rama's breast. He was torn between his unswerving love and belief in his beloved, and the ugly slander that had soiled the hitherto stainless line of the solar monarchs, from Manu descended. At last, after a violent struggle with his soul his conscience spoke, commanding him to put away his innocent wife, Sita, though it would cause heavy suffering and sorrow to both. His heart bled at the stern dictates of his own conscience, but with great and noble souls considerations of personal pleasure or happiness weigh far less than thoughts of immortal fame or a spotless reputation.

All his joy fled, his features marred by sorrow and gloom, Rama called his brothers together in council and informed them of his decision to divorce his Queen rather than allow his fathers' virtuous race to be marred by evil tongues.

Shocked and stricken at the news, Rama's brothers tried to remonstrate with him, but he silenced them with a gesture.

"Well I know my Sita to be innocent of all sin, — as pure and chaste as the moon," said he gravely. "And I know, my brethren, that she is dearer to me than all the wide world, — than life itself! Yet I must part with her, for vulgar tongues have cast a shadow upon her honour. I cannot, in fairness to my sires, allow the pure, shining flawless virtue of their name to be soiled. *Knowing* that she bears my child in her womb, I am moved perforce to divorce her!"

Rama's brothers remained silent when they heard of his resolution to divorce chaste Sita, though they could not agree with his decision. Silently, with their heads bowed in grief they left his presence. Then Rama called to him his favourite brother Lakshman.

"My heart breaks to do this thing O Lakshman,"

he cried, "but I must, for conscience must be obeyed at all costs! My beloved one has told me of her great desire to visit the hermits' grove in the forest. Take her, then, I pray you, and leave her at Valmiki's hermitage — Alas! I cannot bring myself to tell her of my decision. Do thou, good brother, break the news to her as gently as possible!" Weeping, Rama turned away.

Without a word, Lakshman made preparations for the journey, his heart heavy at the heart-breaking task ahead of him.

Lightly he lifted the happy, laughing Sita into his chariot, drawn by white steeds, with old Sumantra at the reins. Together they drove towards the forest, Sita innocently rejoicing that her dear lord had granted her her heart's desire. Cheerfully she chattered about the beauties of the passing scene, whilst Lakshman, his heart bleeding for her, tried valiantly to keep up with her good spirits.

But as they went on, Sita's right eye throbbed painfully, presaging evil to come. Sudden fear assailed her, draining the colour from her cheeks, taking the laughter and gaiety from her eyes. As always, her first thought was for her lord, fervently she prayed for him, and for his unborn child in her womb.

Once, during their journey, the river Ganga blocked their passage, as though she would fain stay, with her billowy might, the evil fate that rushed forward to engulf Sita's life. But Lakshman, in duty bound to obey his brother's mandate, stopped the chariot, crossing the stream with Sita in a tiny boat. On land once more, Lakshman could no longer postpone the evil hour when Sita should hear her doom from his unfortunate lips.

With choking voice and faltering words he told her of Rama's fatal decision. When the full import of Lakshman's words penetrated her consciousness, Sita paled, and fell to the ground senseless like a blossom that withers at the touch of a snowflake. Then life returned to her, and with it the realisation of this new

sorrow and travail, whose pangs shot through her delicate frame like arrows of burnished steel. Painful sobbed racked her pregnant body as she cried in anguished grief and despair

"Ah, woe is me!" sobbed the ill-fated Sita "What sin have I committed, that my lord drives me from him thus? O death thou'd be sweeter far than life, if my beloved's face I am to see no more!"

Himself weeping bitterly, Lakshman tried to comfort his sister

"O my Liege!" he cried "Forgive me for bringing thee such evil tidings! — Perhaps thy lord, in his grief, will relent, and send for thee again"

Then gentle Sita comforted her brother, nor did she breathe a word of reproach against her husband but blamed her evil fortune all upon herself, bewailing it as a punishment for sins committed in former lives

"Dear brother," said she, "Sita is glad to see how faithfully thou dost serve thy lord. May Heaven bless thee for it! — Give my loving regards to the venerable Queens, and ask them to pray for Rama's child, which I bear in my womb" Then, overcome by the piteousness of her state, Sita broke down once more

"Tell my lord," she continued between her sobs, "hath not the holy fire attested to Sita's innocence, yet does he forsake me now, afraid of scandal? This does not beseeem great Rama's nobility — Or should I think it was not done of his own free will, but forced upon my beloved? — Yet 'tis my destiny, wrought by mine own sins in lives gone by, — what boots it to blame others for it?"

'Alas' but lately I was the Queen the Supreme Protectress of my sex. Now, alone and deserted, I must seek protection from another — O bitter irony! — while thou still reignest king, O Rama! Thinkest thou that I care to live without thee, whom I love more than life itself? 'Tis thy precious seed in my womb alone compels me to live on. But once thy child is born, I shall fix my eyes upon the Sun, and pray that I may

meet thee again in a future life”

With a heavy heart, Lakshman left Sita at the Hermit Valmiki's grove, promising to deliver her message to Rama and the elder Queens

When the full horror of her forlorn situation dawned upon Sita in all its stark realism, she wailed like a stricken animal With quick sympathy the psychic creatures that haunted Valmiki's grove reacted to her pathetic grief Peacocks that a moment before had been pirouetting madly around, desisted their gaiety at once, the deer stopped grazing in mute sorrow, the blossoms fell to the earth in tearful drops through all the forest, there arose a moan, which was taken up by the wind, sighed through the trees, and reached the receptive ears of the Poet-Saint Valmiki, whose every perception and instinct was sensitised to the moods of his friends and companions of the forest, — the beasts and birds and trees with whom he dwelt in perfect peace

He whose boundless sympathy for a bird slaughtered in carelessness had found expression in immortal verse, now came upon the harrowing sight of a Queen deserted, — a mother-to-be abandoned, — and his mighty heart was touched with a great pity

Sita bowed reverentially before the Saint, seeking to control her sobs

“My dear child,” said the Saint “I know the tragic happenings that have brought thee here to-day Psychic intuition hath revealed them to me But grieve not, my daughter, thou shalt go to thy father's house if thou so desirest ‘Tis not far from here — Thy lord is all-conquering and powerful in the world, yet for this sin against thee, who art sinless and blameless, he is to be much reproached — This sacred grove gives thee fair welcome, dear child, and thou shalt dwell in it in peace and safety and honour, and here thou shalt bear thy holy off-spring, if so be thy wish

“Here, amidst the fragrant smoke of holy fires with the gentle daughters of Saints and *munis* to dispel thy

sorrow thou shalt find contentment returning to thy spirit And ere long thou wilt know a heavenly calm and a mother's divine joy will be thine"

In tearful gratitude, Sita followed the Saint to the door of the hermitage, where she was received with affection and reverence by the hermits' wives Lovingly they looked after her, dried her tears, and soothed her sorrow with soft words of comfort When night fell the holy dames led her to a hut, where an oil lamp shed its flickering radiance around There, upon a soft couch, they laid her tenderly down to rest, exhausted with sorrow as she was

In that humble abode, Sita dwelt in peace, resigned to her fate, until her time was come, when she brought forth twin sons, who were called Lava and Kusa by the Saint

Meanwhile Lakshman delivered her message to Rama who wept to hear his Sita's words Though he had driven her from his home, he could not drive her out of his heart Night and day the thought of Sita haunted him In his dreams he saw her white, tragic face gazing at him with silent reproach When sleep forsook him he paced the dark, dim corridors of the palace, — a restless mourning, solitary figure in the night

In her solitude at Valmiki's hermitage, Sita heard how her Rama mourned for her worshipping her image night and day And her heart was lightened somewhat

CHAPTER XVII

ONE DAY A BRAHMIN stood before the gates of Rama's palace, in his arms a dead child — and wailed aloud

"O miserable World!" he lamented "What calamity hath overtaken us that thou art fallen into Rama's hands!"

Rama heard the Brahmin's cry, and was smitten

he heart by the bitterness of his words. He sought out the man and comforted him, begging him to stay as his guest whilst he went in search of Yama, the God of Death and compelled him to restore the child to life.

Sending for his magic car, and taking with him his great bow Rama set out at once to seek the god, determined to make him yield the life untimely withered. Hardly had he travelled a few yards, however, when he heard a voice speak unto him arresting him in his tracks.

"Sin walks abroad in thy kingdom, mighty one," said the Voice. "If thou wilt defeat it, thy wish will be fulfilled!"

Rama wondered to hear the words, and sped through the air, searching for the sin that was a curse to his people.

At last he came upon a man hanging down from a tree, practising self-torture.

Rama stopped his car, and enquired of the man who he was, and to what caste he belonged.

"My name is Sambuka, and I am a *Sudra*," answered the self-torturer.

In a flash, Rama realised that here was the sin that marred his people's happiness, for the Law forbade *Sudras* to aspire to win Heaven by practising austerities. Drawing his sword, Rama cut off the transgressor's head. The slave, being thus beheaded by royal hands, was at once absolved from sin, and in this way gained the Heaven he sought to win.

Upon his return journey, Rama met Saint Agastya, who gave him a priceless gem, which he tied around his arm.

When he arrived at Ayodhya, Rama found the Bramin overwhelmed with joy that his son had been miraculously restored to life. He went about the town singing praises of Rama, telling all of the miracle he had performed.

"Lives there a mortal," cried he, "who can bring even the dead back to life?"

Sixteen years had gone by since Rama and Sita were parted, when Rama made preparations to celebrate the mighty Horse-Sacrifice or *aswamedha*, to cleanse his soul of mortal sin. Invitations were sent to all the Kings and Saints of the world to come and grace the occasion.

Ayodhya was crowded with visitors when the great day dawned. In his lonely state, Rama sat upon his throne, the thought of his absent consort gnawing at his memory.

At last the great ritual began amidst splendour and solemnity. Prominent among the Saints was Valmiki, who brought with him Lava and Kusa, the fair sons of Sita. Like a pair of heavenly twins, they went singing before the King and before the people, melting the hearts of all men, and stirring up their souls with the sweet strains of the "Song of Rama," which told of his marvellous deeds and his exile in the forest, in Valmiki's matchless verse.

Strangely moved, the crowds gazed upon the twain, wondering to see the marked resemblance of the pretty minstrel-boys to their King. Rama himself was irresistibly charmed and attracted to the beautiful pair. He asked them who had taught them the moving song, and upon hearing the name of Valmiki, he started, then went eagerly forward to meet the Poet-Saint followed by his brothers, and threw himself down at his feet.

"Arise, great Rama," quoth the Bard, pity surging in his breast to drive out the reproach of former days. "Receive thy fair sons, the children of pure Sita, thy true and lawful wife."

Then Rama wept tears of joy mingled with sorrow and regret at the remembrance of his banished wife. Clasp'g the fair boys to his heart, he knew for the first time in his life a father's perfect joy.

"O great Saint!" he cried. "Thou hast overcome me to-day with such great joy as bursts my very heart! — I have no words to thank thee adequately. Say what Rama can do for thee, O mighty soul. All my Kingdom and myself I throw before thy feet in gratitude."

"O King!" replied Valmiki. "Thou shalt repay me best by calling to thee thy true and faithful wife Sita, to reign beside thee as thy rightful Queen "

Rama was overjoyed to hear the Saint give the command that lay nearest to his heart

"Oh, Father!" he exclaimed rapturously "Thou knowest thy child, my beloved Sita, proved her innocence to me beyond all doubt, through the ordeal of the holy fire But the people in their wickedness stained her honour, scandalising her fair name O mighty Saint, bring my Sita back, and bid her prove to the people that she is spotless, and I shall receive her back into my home with the greatest joy "

Valmiki then sent his disciples to bring Sita to Ayodhya, whilst Rama commanded that upon the morrow all the citizens should be assembled together before the throne

The next day, therefore, Saint Valmiki led Sita by the hand, followed by her fair sons, before Rama's throne Clad in simple robes of white, Sita appeared like the chaste moon, her eyes cast down, her demeanour calm and unruffled The people gazed at her with awe, deeply ashamed that they had stained her honour with their impure thoughts

Trembling with emotion, Rama looked upon his beloved's face once more, his soul in turmoil

Gravely the Saint addressed Sita

"My child," said he "Prove to these people that thou art pure of mind and body, and free from all taint of sin The King thy husband waits to bear witness to thy trial "

An acolyte then brought Sita a jug of pure water, which she drank before she solemnly prayed in calm, clear tones

"O Mother Earth!" cried Sita "If in truth I have lived a life undefiled, pure and holy, nor never strayed from the narrow path of duty and honour to my lord, then receive thy Sita back into thy loving bosom!"

Thus prayed the unsullied and holy Sita, whilst all

around her wept Suddenly the Earth was rent open and a Form appeared, crowned with a shining radiance Claspings to her breast the pure and sinless Sita the Form disappeared with her before their gaze, leaving Rama crying in anguish

"Stay! Stay! — Do not go! — 'Twas all a terrible mistake!" But alas! 'twas too late that Rama realised the error of his thinking His new-found joy turning into bitterness and gall, he flung himself upon the ground raging furiously, and would fain have snatched Sita back into his arms, but the Saints restrained him, calming his rage and grief

Sorrowfully Rama turned to his fair sons, and upon them showered the pent-up love of his heart, — the great love that had been their mother's, he now lavished upon his sons

Thereafter the Divine Hero turned his eyes heavenwards daily praying for death to come as a sweet release One day, when Rama's soul had plumbed the depths of despair, Brahma appeared to him in a vision, and said

"Why dost thou agonise thyself, O Rama? Thou knowest life is a mere dream, ephemeral and transitory — a pebble upon the shores of time, — an illusion that soon passes?"

At last the sands of time began to run out for Rama Death came to him disguised as a *muni*, and said

"What I have to say to thee O King, must be done in secret!" Then Rama commanded all his court to withdraw But faithful Lakshman stood sentinel at the door listening, for he was anxious for his brother's sake "I am Yama," said the *muni* "And I am come to tell thee that the time is at hand when thou must leave the earth"

When Lakshman heard these words, he went grieving to Sarayu's banks, and there shed his earthly body Thus Rama, a part of his being having departed from him staggered for a while upon earth, then mounted the celestial bird Garuda, and ascended into Heaven, where

he found Sita, more beautiful than ever, waiting for him with a smile

CHAPTER XVIII

NOW THE SONS of Raghu reigned their realms in peace, unanimously electing Kusa, the eldest son of Rama, to the throne of sovereign power, as Supreme Ruler

Late one night, Kusa was reading in the chamber of the palace at Kusavati, where he dwelt, when there appeared to him a Shape, a female form, robed in mourning. Claspings its hands together, it hailed him "King!"

"Who art thou?" asked Kusa, startled "And how didst thou come through my barred doors, O fair one?— Speak what thou desirest of Rama's son, but let me warn thee aforesaid the sons of Raghu will not tolerate any idea of licence!"

"I am no wanton sinner," answered the Shape, "but the guardian goddess of the mourning city of Ayodhya, deserted since thy father passed from the earth. Once, more glorious than Alaka, it now lies desolate and neglected, O King!"

"Bare and empty lie its palaces, their halls echoing no laughter or music. Jackals haunt its deserted highways seeking for prey and howling dismally. Bloody-mouthed tigers defile the marble halls and stair-cases where fair princesses once tripped merrily, whilst lions' claws tear up the pictured animals and birds.

"Sweet blossoms that once opened to the touch of feminine hands are ravaged by apes and monkeys. Those thousand windows that shone by night like a myriad stars are now dark and dismal. Decayed and decomposed lie the dreary rooms, their once glowing hearths now cold and dead.

"No saintly hermits haunt Sarayu's banks, nor

graceful forms bathe in its holy waters O great King peerless son of heavenly Rama, I pray thee return once more to Ayodhya, — restore it again to its pristine glory!"

Thus importunately did the Spirit of the City beg of her King to return to her, then vanished as mysteriously as she had come The next morning Kusa related the vision to his Brahmin counsellors, who were unanimously of opinion that Kusa should return to his father's state capital without delay

Thus it came about that upon an auspicious day, Kusa with his Queens ministers, courtiers, attendants, and followed by his hosts and armies, set out for Ayodhya leaving Kusavati in the charge of priests and hermits

On and on marched the heaving, surging mass of humanity, until they reached the Sarayu banks, lined by monuments erected by Kusa's mighty sires each marking some splendid and memorable sacrifice Then Kusa commanded his armies to encamp on the outskirts of the city, from where swarms of soldiers went to work to cleanse and clear the beautiful old capital, to make it habitable once more

Thereafter the King with his Queens occupied the ancient palace of his sires, whilst his courtiers were given handsome mansions to dwell in, each according to his rank and status Once more Ayodhya throbbed with life, its thoroughfares were thronged with happy crowds its houses peopled with men and women its bazars alive and buzzing with the hubbub of humanity

When summer came on with its unbearable heat Kusa went with his Queens to the Sarayu streams, where they bathed and splashed in the placid waters to their hearts' content As the King sported with the Queens and their maidens who looked like charming languorous water-nymphs with their wet garments clinging to their luxuriant figures, there fell unnoticed into the water a bracelet he wore around his arm It contained the peerless gem that Agastya of yore had given to Rama

and Rama had bequeathed it to his son with the kingdom, being a pledge of victory

When Kusa discovered his loss, he ordered a search to be carried out to recover the lost jewel. Fishermen and boatmen and divers toiled long and laboriously, scouring the river to its depths, but in vain, until hopeless and despairing, they gave up the search at last

"Sire," said the searchers "We have spared no inch of river, but no precious gem can be found. We fear it has been stolen by the mighty Naga-King Kumuda, who dwells below the waters."

Angrily Kusa strung his bow, and went down to the river-side, fixing his arrow to destroy the Serpent-King. As he did so, however, Kumuda himself appeared out of the waters, accompanied by his beautiful sister Kumudvati, with her arms outstretched to restore the bracelet. Upon seeing them, Kusa withheld his arrow, struck by the maiden's beauty. Seeing this, Kumuda smilingly said

"I know thou art the son of divine Rama, born of him when he lived upon earth for the salvation of men from the tyranny of the *Rakshasas*. 'Twas my sister here who saw the glittering bracelet whilst playing with her ball, and caught it eagerly. Now restore it to thy arm, O King, and take my virgin sister Kumudvati, who would serve thee gladly, I am sure."

The maiden blushed crimson at these words, and modestly cast down her eyes.

"Gladly will I call thee brother," answered Kusa warmly, overjoyed at the sudden fruition of his overpowering desire for the lovely maid.

The marriage of Kumuda's fair sister to Rama's peerless son was celebrated with great pomp and solemnity in a short time. When Kusa took the lovely Kumudvati's hand in his own, before the sacred fire, heavenly music sounded in the skies, and a rain of sweet-smelling flowers fell softly upon the bridal pair, proclaiming to the world

that this was indeed a marriage that was made in heaven.

Soon there was rejoicing in the royal household for Kumudvati, the beautiful Naga princess, bore to her lord a son,—a fair child, named Atithi, who was the apple of his parents' eyes.

Kusa taught his son all lore and religious knowledge as befitted a son of Raghu's line. When he was well versed in all princely virtues and accomplishments and had grown to manhood's estate, his father sought him lovely brides from royal houses.

Soon after, Kusa was summoned by Indra to help him in war against the *Daityas* but alas! was slain in battle by Durjaya, who was likewise laid low. Untimely widowed the beauteous Kumudvati pined for her lord, until Death called her home too.

Their noble son Atithi was then anointed for the throne, and ruled his kingdom wisely and well being held in high esteem by the guardians of the three Worlds. From high Heaven, Indra showered his country with the blessing of rains, Yama held back deadly pestilences, the Lord of the Ocean granted prosperous passage over the waters to all his people, and Kuvera increased the treasures of the Earth.

Anon came others in Raghu's star-spangled dynasty—some twenty-odd generations of kings, luminous personalities all, great-hearted and lofty, princes without peer. Men of destiny and high courage they reigned supreme, each one his predetermined span of kingship, temperance and justice their motto of rule, matchless heroism their watchword in war. Mighty of arm yet modest of mien, each was the pivot of the universe he inhabited.

set eyes upon their sovereign from one year's end to another. At length, getting tired of their entreaties, Agnivarma feigned acquiescence, and, to the great amusement of his lady-loves, who tittered with delight, he placed one foot disdainfully out of the window!

The King's councillors were utterly chagrined and disappointed at this show of indiscretion and eccentricity on the part of their monarch. But the people,—simple, loyal souls that they were,—bent their knee before that foot belonging to one of Raghu's glorious dynasty, and were content.

The seasons came and went, but they seemed all alike to Agnivarma, plunged as he was in love's lusts and passions. At last, fell disease attacked his body, untimely consuming his frame, burning it out with the passions that were lit therein. But though the King knew the toll he had to pay for his folly, he refused to give up the lusts of the flesh.

Daily he wasted away, growing pale and lean, walking with unsteady gait, all his limbs ravaged by fever and consumption. For a long time, his faithful ministers hid the truth from his people, who were puzzled and afraid at the continued absence of their sovereign. At last, an idea struck one of the councillors, a septuagenarian greybeard.

"Let us tell the people that the King is making a Sacrifice to beget a son, and is thus constrained to live a retired and secluded life given up to prayer and fasting."

"But that is a lie!" exclaimed a younger colleague, shocked. "How can we broadcast such a flagrant falsehood?"

"Nevertheless 'tis a white lie," answered the old man, smiling. "Sometimes a white lie is preferable to a truth that hurts."

In truth the people were much comforted to hear this explanation for though the King had many wives, he had no sons to succeed him. But alas! the slim thread upon which the King's life now hung in the balance.

snapped all too soon, and he gave up the ghost ere he was able to look upon his son's face

The profligate King dying thus prematurely, his ministers were hard put to it to break the news to the people. Hastily and in secret they laid the wasted body of the prodigal king upon a pyre, and burnt it in a dark grove near the palace. Then calling a council together, they decided to place upon the throne the rightful Queen in whom lay the future hope of the realm, consecrating the unborn babe with sacred waters from golden jars.

The widowed Queen sat mourning upon the throne of sorrow, shedding hot tears for the fatherless child that lay in her womb, and longed desperately to be freed of her precious load.

When the tragic truth was told to the people, they grieved for the young widow who graced the throne as Regent. In a stream they came, honouring and reverencing her as she sat pale-faced and lonely upon the throne of sorrow, obeying her every wish and command as though it were the behest of the Lord Vishnu himself.

And thus ends the saga of the "Raghuvansa," the story of that matchless breed of heroes whose fame will endure to the end of all time.

MEGHDOOT
OR
THE MESSENGER - CLOUD

PART ONE

A-TOP THE MOUNTAIN of Ramagiri, a *Yaksa* once stood solitary and desolate, gazing wearily around at the dreary, self-same landscape that stretched forth each day before his brooding eyes,—an exile from his native land

The tranquil woodlands seemed to bring no peace or solace to his disturbed spirit, or the cool, rushing waters any blessing to his jaded eyes, for sadness filled his soul to the brim, leaving no room for comfort or consolation

"Alas! What misery follows in the wake of one mistake!" he wailed, loudly lamenting his unfortunate plight "One little error,—one false move,—and the whole happy pattern of my existence has changed from one of utmost bliss to that of blackest despair

'Full many a moon have I spent upon this lonesome mountain, ruing that unhappy day back home in Alaka, when, forgetful of my bounden duty, I earned the righteous wrath of Kuvera, my master, and was doomed to a year's exile Damnation!—A twelve month of separation from my dearly beloved one, my wife, my sweetheart, my own,—alas!—how shall I sustain it?

'Speak, O heavens, that have silently watched my agony night and day,—what respite have the gods to offer mortals for pain such as mine,—a pain that gnaws at my vitals,—that sears my very soul?

'Ha! What vision is that I see in the sky's azure depths? Do the heavens answer my prayer? Behold, they conjure up the face of my beloved! Ah, love! love!

—'Tis thee in very truth!

"Alas! 'twas the changing face of a darksome cloud—no more—that I did gaze upon, which my fevered imagination invested with the familiar features of my dear one

"Yet stay—thou mayest do me a service, Cloud, though thou hast brought me sad disillusionment—Wilt thou Darkling carry a message to her I love, whose pining heart hath been pierced by sorrow as deep as harrowing as my own?"

"Oh I weep before thee Cloud, as visions of other monsoon days float swiftly before my mind,—days when my love beside me we did sport merrily upon high Alaka great Kallasa's pride whilst the rain-drops freely found our faces kissing them with their fresh and dewy moisture

I woo thee O Cloud, with these dainty jasmine blossoms which mine own hand hath plucked from the mountain-side and fall before thee in prayer, if thou wilt but give my message to my fair one, broken-hearted by this our first parting

"O Cloud I adjure thee as thou art full of pity and tearful compassion tell my love that I live though agonising for her night and day

'O noble Minister of the Monsoon, that dost traverse the skies in changeful aspect—now fearsome, now gay now picturesque now grotesque—I beg thee upon my bended knees grant me this boon

'O bringer of the blessed rains, thou that dost give comfort and consolation to them overpowered by the scorching heat wilt thou not also bear comfort to my dear one torn from my bosom by Kuvera's cruel anger

"Go then O thrice-blessed Cloud, over the plains and under to that noble mountain of Kallasa, upon whose summits stands the pride of the Yaksas, high Alaka the white all-entrancing city of palaces Thou shalt find it sweet Messenger of Love by its marble turret gleaming brightly in the clear moonlight—by the figure

of Siva adorning its outer court-yards

"Upon thy way, O Cloud, thou mayest bring light and excitement into the eyes and hearts of women in love, who joy to see thee once more, thou herald of the rainy season that tralleth the path of the seven winds, for thou bringeth hope to the hearts and confidence to the lives of these impatient ones, who know well their wandering husbands will now hie home without delay, nor wait to brave the monsoon's fury

"Onward, onward, fly, O Cloud, gliding softly with the wind, that pushes thee gently along its path, with the rain-drinking *cataka* upon thy left, singing a glad anthem of joy in expectation of a hearty draught whilst the female cranes give thee thanks for the rapture of the procreative moment

"Wilt thou not hasten on thy way, sweet Cloud, to where my beloved waits in impatience for a sight of her lord, her heart-broken sighs reaching up to thee high in the heavens?

"Constantly keeping thee company, the wild swans longing for the cold waters of Lake Manosarovar in the Himalayas will cheer thee upon thy lonesome way, until great Kailasa comes into view, whence they will wing onward, yet further onward, to their native lakes, feeding upon the root of the lotus-blossoms growing in the way-side waters

"Listen, O friend, to my words, as I show thee the best route for thy travels and then shalt thou hear the message to be delivered to my love

"O Cloud, if thou shouldst weary upon thy way, then rest thyself upon the mountain's top, whilst thou quench thy thirst with a refreshing draught from the streams flowing down its sides, whilst the wives of the mystics gaze upon thee in amazement, as thou doth seemingly swallow up its summit

'Northward bound, then proceed upon thy way, by that bush of green *niculas*, but beware lest thou receive blows from the *Dinnagas*' thick trunks

—'Tis thee in very truth'

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"O Cloud I adjure thee, as thou art full of pity and tearful compassion, tell my love that I live though agonising for her night and day

"O noble Minister of the Monsoon, that dost traverse the skies in changeful aspect,—now fearsome, now gay now picturesque, now grotesque,—I beg thee upon my bended knees, grant me this boon

"O bringer of the blessed rains, thou that dost give comfort and consolation to them overpowered by the scorching heat wilt thou not also bear comfort to my dear one, torn from my bosom by Kuvera's cruel anger

"Go, then, O thrice-blessed Cloud, over the plains and yonder, to that noble mountain of Kallasa, upon whose summit stands the pride of the Yaksas, high Alaka, the all-white, all-entrancing city of palaces Thou shalt know it, sweet Messenger of Love, by its marble turret gleaming brightly in the clear moonlight,—by the figure

of Śiva adorning its outer court-yards

"Upon thy way, O Cloud, thou mayest bring light and excitement into the eyes and hearts of women in love, who joy to see thee once more, thou herald of the rainy season, that traileth the path of the seven winds, for thou bringeth hope to the hearts and confidence to the lives of these impatient ones, who know well their wandering husbands will now hie home without delay, nor wait to brave the monsoon's fury

"Onward, onward, fly, O Cloud, gliding softly with the wind, that pushes thee gently along its path, with the rain-drinking *cataka* upon thy left singing a glad anthem of joy in expectation of a hearty draught whilst the female cranes give thee thanks for the rapture of the procreative moment

"Wilt thou not hasten on thy way, sweet Cloud, to where my beloved waits in impatience for a sight of her lord, her heart-broken sighs reaching up to thee high in the heavens?

"Constantly keeping thee company, the wild swans longing for the cold waters of Lake Manosarovar in the Himalayas will cheer thee upon thy lonesome way until great Kallasa comes into view, whence they will wing onward, yet further onward, to their native lakes feeding upon the root of the lotus-blossoms growing in the way-side waters

"Listen, O friend, to my words as I show thee the best route for thy travels and then shalt thou hear the message to be delivered to my love

"O Cloud, if thou shouldst weary upon thy way then rest thyself upon the mountain's top, whilst thou quench thy thirst with a refreshing draught from the streams flowing down its sides, whilst the wives of the mystics gaze upon thee in amazement, as thou doth seemingly swallow up its summit

"Northward bound, then proceed upon thy way, by that bush of green *n.culas*, but beware lest thou receive blows from the *Dinnagas*' thick trunks

"Now behold the many-hued Bow of Indra glistening gaily over the peak of Valmikagra, irradiating thy darksome face with its luminous colours, that rival the brilliance of a peacock's bright feathers lighting up the dark dress of Krishna, the *Gopati*

"Pretty country wenches, with sun-kissed cheeks and innocent eyes, will gaze upon thee awe-struck, as they remember thy power to bring them prosperity—or ruin.

"Then wing thy way westward, for a spell, as thou fleest over Mala's furrowed fields, with their smell of fragrant earth, then once more turn thy face to the north

"Art thou fatigued by thy travels, O long-suffering one? Thou mayest refresh thyself by resting upon high Amrakuta's peak, after putting out the fires raging through its wooded forest-lands. Lives there a man with soul so base who will not show gratitude for services rendered? How much more he, a mountain so sublime?

"O dark Cloud, what a picturesque spectacle in light and shade wilt thou present, as thou dost come to rest upon that noble peak, whose sides are covered with mango-trees in profusion, dangling their rich, ripe, golden fruits, a sight worthy the eyes of the celestials,—dark upon the mountain-top, and light over all the earth around

"Meander over the valleys for a time, dear Cloud, whilst thou pourest forth thy bountiful rains upon the humble forester and his wife, then quicken thy speed as thou dost cross beyond, until the fair Reva comes into view, flanked by stony cliffs. In silvery streaks that gleam in the sunshine, behold how lovingly it clings to the foot of the Vindhya, that give it life and sustenance

"Art thou spent of thy main force, dear Messenger of Hope? Then, before thou dost wend thy way onward drink deep of Reva's waters to quench thy great thirst,—where the *jambu-tree* fords it across,—where the sweet smell of elephants' ichor pervades the cool air

' n n heavy-laden with water, shalt thou travel

slowly onward, thy burden an impediment to thy speedy flight

"The spotted deer that roam the fields gaze upon thee with ecstasy, grateful for the lush greenness of the forests after thou hast poured thy cooling balm over their burnt-out roots, as they graze happily upon the *kadamba* blossoms, and the plantains that border the river-banks Faithful as thine own shadow, they will follow thy trail, O blessed Cloud hungering for the drops thy bounty doth grant them

"Then, over sweet-scented mountains range at thy will thick with the white blossoms of the *kutaja*, whose beauty would fain hold thee back, when thou must hurry upon thy labour of love,—hurry, though bright-eyed peacocks shriek out a tumultuous welcome to thee, their herald of love and romance, tempting thee with their dance of joy.

"Thence wilt thou soar over the Dasarnas' woodlands, that are whitened by the blossoming *ketaka* flowers, where the chirruping sparrows twitter all day,—where the royal swans haunt the *jambu-trees*, heavy with the luscious fruits spilling their dark juice upon the ground

"At last reaching the great city of Vidisa, thou shalt drink deep of the waters of the river Vetravati, whilst gently thundering upon its banks, and casting thy dark shadows over its rippling waves, as thou dost imitate a face dark with angry foreboding

"O weary Cloud, dost thou need rest unto thy limbs? Then betake thee in haste to the Mountain of Nicaïr, where the orange-coloured *kadambas* grow in wild profusion, and votaries of passion haunt the dark and cavernous depths

"And so on thy way again, travelling over rivulets, bedewing with thy cool sprays the jasmine bushes growing wild upon their banks, lighting up with gladness the charming faces of flower-sellers, who joy to give thee greeting,—dark herald of the rainy season,—as they wipe their rain-wet faces with faded lotus-blossoms from among the fragrant wares laid out before them

"Wouldst thou behold, O Cloud, a city of beauteous palaces and lovelier maidens? Then hie thee, O blessed Rain-giver, to the great capital of Ujjain,—though thou traverse thy way backward to do so,—and view at leisure the vast edifices of marble that flash white in thy lightning-light, whilst bright-eyed damsels glance at thee fascinated, fearfully averting their gaze from thy scintillating brightness. Didst ever see so pleasing a sight, O traveller of the wide Universe?"

"Once more upon thy way, to the north, where the Nirvindhya crosses thy path, behold the birds gliding smoothly over its waters, making tumultuous clamour as the rippling waves form into little whirlpools at their feet, like maidens in love, tremulous and shaking before their lovers' eyes

"O faithless one, dost thou journey on heedlessly forsaking the river that doth tearfully mourn for thee all pale and wan with pining, like a weeping woman with braided hair who sorrows for her absent husband?"

"Now dost thou come to the Avantis, whose people love to tell tales of their fair princess and the heroic Udayana King of the Vatsas, with whom she eloped and lived happily ever after. Now hie thee once more to the city of Visala,—wonderful Visala!—which men now call Ujjain, that city of glory, a very Paradise on earth, peopled by those virtuous souls whom Heaven hath sent back upon Earth

"Linger awhile in this bit of Heaven, O fortunate Cloud, and thrill to the beauty of its rosy dawn when the morning breeze blows from the Sipra, bringing with it the *sarasa's* sweet song, low and mournful, whilst the fragrance of the lotus-blossom will soothe thee gently, like a tender lover who woos his mistress with many a soft caress

"Madly pirouetting upon the flat terrace-gardens the bright-hued peacocks greet thee gaily, dancing with abandonment at the return of the courting season. The fragrant smoke of burning incense escaping from latticed

windows mingling with the scent of fresh flowers, and the sight of pretty damsels tripping the light fantastic their roseate feet trailing the red lac upon the terraced ground will refresh thee after thy weary journey, O thou much-travelled one

"Next wend thy way to the dwelling-place of Siva great Lord of the three Worlds, whose lotus-laden gardens hum with the music of the waving wind, that wafts thee the scent of perfumed ointments from the cool waters of fragrant Gandhavati, wherein lovely maidens love to bathe

"As the day ends, do thou visit holy Mahakala, there to dwell till the hour of sunset, when, O darkling Cloud thou mayest let forth thy mighty thunder in homage to the Lord of the Worlds who will reward thee richly for thy eventide worship

"Then let fall thy gracious drops O fitful Cloud, upon beautiful nautch-girls with twirling skirts and twinkling anklets, who wave their arms madly in the air, brandishing the gay *camaras*, their hips heavy with jewelled girdles that soothe their love-lacerated limbs, their eyes darting to and fro like butterflies in winged flight

"Then O majestic Cloud, garbed in rosy sunset hues wouldst thou take the place of the bloody elephant-hide when Siva begins his Dance of Victory, to win the grateful glances of his terror-stricken consort Bhavani?

"Or wouldst thou do a service to fond women, hastening to keep a tryst with their lovers? Then by thy lightning's light, brighten their path that is shrouded in black night, but keep thy sharp showers yet awhile, O merciful one, nor let thy thunder roll, lest thou frighten and terrorise the gentle ones

"And so, having served the cause of love, and tired out thy bright-limbed consort in the doing at daybreak be upon thy way again dear Messenger, to oblige a friend for friendship's duty is a sacred bond and a labour of love, to boot

"Make haste, O darkling one to the north once more

ror the hour of sunrise is at hand, when tardy lovers must dry the tears from their over-wrought mistresses' eyes, and placate them with honeyed words And thou too, mayest be hard put to it to escape the wrath of the majestic Sun for having dared to shed thy cold drops upon his beloved lotus-blossom's lovely face

"Now gently, gently steal over the still waters of Gambhira, darkening her mirror-like surface with thy handsome face, nor disdain with arrogant pride her ardent glances, as tremulously she gazes up at thee through the meandering fishes

"When thou hast sucked up her cool waters for thy needs, leaving her all bare and naked to the depths, with her green reeds exposed to view, then—oh then—wilt thou find it a wrench to part from her, O Cloud, even as a man who hath once tasted of the sweets of a woman's body, will tear himself reluctantly from her joyous embrace

"Then wafted onward by the cool breeze that sings through the trees, collecting fragrance galore from the sweet-scented earth, wilt thou soon reach the mountain of the gods, Devagiri, upon which dwelleth the war-god, Skanda, the Youth Eternal

"Upon him, O Cloud, shower thy bounteous spray, whilst, rolling thy thunder across the mountain-side making Skanda's peacock dance madly around, buoyantly basking in the moon's bright rays, watched by fond Bhavani with a smile upon her lips

"Thus, O pious Cloud, wilt thou worship the Holy One,—he whom the Holy Wives found among the reeds, where the Goddess Ganga laid him to sleep as a babe

"Then, upon thy way again, spray with thy raindrops the *Gandharva* musicians, who fly away in fear at thy speedy approach—Wouldst thou pay homage yet in thy mood of piety, O faithful one? Then pause awhile to contemplate with devotion the river of blood that Surabhi's children gave in sacrifice to Rantideva of old

"O thou of inky hue, who didst borrow thy colour from

Vishnu's dark neck, wilt thou bend down to drink the sacred waters of the River of Sacrifice? Watched by the angels, thou dost reduce it to a narrow stream, like a string of pearls that doth encircle the neck of the Earth, with thou, its sapphire-blue clasp, in the centre

"Then, with thy fullness restored, follow thou thy path once more, admired by the lovely women of Dasapura, who arch their eyebrows prettily upward towards thee, as they peer through their dark lashes, like flickering jasmine blossoms upon which the honey-bees settle in their winged flight

"And so to Brahmavarta, the Holy Land,—and soon shalt thou behold the tragic battle-field of Kurukshetra, marred by the blood of a myriad warriors,—where Arjuna, the dauntless, discharged his hundred thousand arrows with lightning aim, even as thou, O King of Clouds, doth free thy generous showers over the lotus buds

"O blessed Bearer of Love's Tidings, hast thou ever tasted of the waters of the holy Saraswati? Even as Balarama the Brave, who would not slay his brethren for love's sake, nor drink the wine that lovely Revati offered, but drowned his sin in Saraswati's sacred pool, thereby gaining purity of body and soul, do thou, O dusky one, likewise become lightened with its purifying draught

"Now must thou glide over Kanakhal, whence the sacred Ganga descends to the plains, until thou reach the waters of Jahnu's Maid,—she that did the sixty thousand sons of Sagara explete from their sins Laughing, she splashes her rocky sides, remembering the face of Gauri, as angrily she frowned at her for presuming to touch the crown of her Lord Siva

"Now cast thy dark shadow over the sacred Ganga turning her crystal depths to azure brightness, whilst softly thou steal away its clear waters

"At last the Himalayas spring into view,—that gave the Ganga birth,—mighty and grand, with sparkling diamond-points that soar into the heavens, their craggy

sides scented with the musk of reindeer roaming upon its majestic heights

"Then, weary upon thy way, shalt thou rest lightly upon its crown, thy dark and misty allure glistening ethereally upon the snowy peaks

"Is that a fire that rages among the phosphorescent pines,—which the travelling wind spreads far and wide—burnishing with its flames the tails of the yaks and the *camaris*? Hasten, then and shed thy soothing drops upon the winding flames that play havoc with the landscape, for such is the office of all noble ones,—to give succour wherever it is needed

"But if perchance the fierce *Sarabhas* trespass upon thy path, challenging thee with their pigmy strength then hurl thy hailstones upon them, and they will fly before thy mighty onslaught, as the demon hosts before Rama

"And now, O noble Cloud with devotion supreme hover sunwise over the Holy Footprint of Siva the Three-eyed that lies buried under a mound of religious offerings This, the faithful do declare, if a holy man will look upon but once, his sins being forgiven him his soul may travel the Worlds without let or hindrance

"Swayed by the balmy winds, the bamboo reeds do hum with sweet music, as fair *Kimnaras* tell thee in song, tales of their conquests, whilst thou with thy rolling thunder do provide the deep bass that echoes and re-echoes over the soaring summits—a paean of praise to the Great Shepherd King

"Now travel on O wandering Cloud, o'er range after range of snowy Himalayan peaks, then wind thy way northward through the narrow gorge that Rama-with-the-Axe cut deep through the mountain, when on his way to slay the hated *Kshatriyas* Balanced precariously over the wild swans' roadway, thy dark shape will appear like Vishnu's black foot, ready to dash Bali down to Patala's dark depths

"Then drift on, O Cloud, towards Kailasa's sublime

heights, that mirror the beauty of exquisite *apsaras* Ridge upon ridge of silver-white glory wilt thou encounter, kissing the skies, like the snowy laughter of the Triple-eyed God

"When thou hast climbed the steep slopes of Kailasa, with thy dark blue shadow falling over its dazzling whiteness, then wilt thou deem that mountain fairer and more entrancing to the eye than Balarama, the Brave

"Doth Gauri wish to walk arm-in-arm with her Lord upon the dizzy heights of high Himalaya? Then wilt thou not, O chivalrous one, make a frozen stairway for her royal feet to travel over, thyself leading the way?

"Upon great Kailasa, too, the celestial nymphs will dance and sing with joy when thou pourest down thy showers upon their golden bodies and they will scarcely let thee off easily, until becoming impatient, thou wilt sternly frighten them out of their wits by the roar of thy mighty thunder reverberating across the vast heavens

"Then onward, O mighty Cloud to the beautiful depths of Manosarovar Lake, flecked by the golden magic of the lotus-lilies in full bloom, drinking of its icy waters until thou art full to overflowing

"Roam at thy will, O gracious one, over the snowy regions, flapping thy wide wings over the sides of the great mountain, singing thy way through the trees, thy cold winds madly shaking the boughs to and fro

"And now, at last, look upon the fair face of my native city, Alaka, — alluring Alaka' — that doth nestle among the snows like a priceless jewel set amid diamonds which once seen shalt thou never forget, as it soars statuesquely to the skies, with its seven-storied palaces rising up to greet thee, thy waters running down its sides in rivulets, like stringed pearls down a love-sick maiden's tresses

PART TWO

"MIDST MARBLE PALACES inlaid with precious stones, whose high-domed ceilings seem to touch the roof of Heaven, — where maidens full of allure dance to the rhythm of tabor and lute where beautiful women bedecked with flowers that bloom in the summer and spring, in autumn and winter sport among the royal chambers, their merry laughter resounding through the courtyards,—there wilt thou now adventure, O fortunate Cloud, thy weariness vanishing in the champagne-crisp air, at the gorgeous spectacle laid out before thee

'Upon the terraced roof-gardens splendidly costumed women, escorted by the *Yaksa* hosts trip merrily along, their sandalled feet mirrored in the sparkling floors paved with bright crystal, to capture in their clear depths the stars of the night

"Intoxicated by wine, and thoughts of tender passion, their amorous glances darting to and fro like honey-bees upon a flower, they revel in life's sweetness, humming to the melody of lute and tabor and drum, deep as the roar of thy mighty thunder

"Ravishing maidens, wooed by the immortal gods, play among the coral-trees, their sun-kissed cheeks glowing in the cold winds from Mandakini's waters as they hide their jewelled trifles deep in the golden sands, to search for them again with earnest faces and puckered brows

"Here, too, their lovers, swayed by passionate desire, bring the blood rushing to their faces as boldly they

strip off their kirtles before them. Confused and hotly blushing, the cherry-lipped ones attempt in vain to put out the luminous lamps made of precious jewels, throwing powder in profusion over their burning wicks.

"Thy wayward steps, O exalted Cloud, now lead thee on through the palace storeys, pushed upward by the wandering wind, as melting with softness, thou pourest out thy dewy moisture upon the lovely pictured faces, then, as it were, frightened by thine own boldness, rushest out through the lattices, like a guilty lover, fearful of the householder's wrath, who seekest to escape it by vanishing through the back door!

"From the high-domed ceilings hang jewelled chandeliers, whence moonstones trickle cool drops of water upon love-lorn women languishing for the rapture of love's embrace, whilst men of wealth, their homes a rich store-house of priceless treasures, passionately court the lovely nymphs haunting the celestial grove of Valbhraja as *Kimnaras*, high-piping and vibrant, sing the praises of the God of Riches.

"When at sunrise, thou stretchest forth thyself to thy full size, mark well, O Cloud, the path taken by distraught women in love hastening by night to meet their beloved ones, strewn with the blossoms of the *mandara* tree fallen from lustrous tresses, jewels shed from lovely ears and throats, strings of pearls torn by the fullness of youthful breasts.

"There, Kama still fears to encounter the dread Shiva, whose eye of anger hath of yore reduced him to ashes, and abstains from too freely wielding his bow-string of bees, or his flower-tipped arrows filled with Love's potency.

"But artful maidens, their rolling eyes darting to and fro in search of Love's adventures take upon themselves the burden of Kama's task: their targets the young swains ever ready and willing to savour of the joy that Kama brings.

"Upon them, the heavens lavish their choicest gifts

of shining silks and satins to fascinate the eyes of men, of priceless gems to lend lustre to fiery orbs, of wines to bring colour to the cheeks, and intoxication to the head, of scented flowers to delight and enchant the senses, and roseate dyes to paint dancing feet

"And now at last that home of mine, — wherein once dwelt all love and joy and happiness supreme — comes into view, there beyond the palace of the God of Riches

"Thou'lt know it, O Cloud, by its exalted door that imitates the Bow of Indra where growing in glory and grace stands a lone *mandara* tree swamped by a profusion of lovely blossoms, cared for by the hands of my beloved

"Now come, O ye Cloud, down the staircase of emeralds, to the lake thick-laden with lotus blossoms, where the white swans pine for thy blessed raindrops making mournful dirge ere thou comest but sighing with content at sight of thee nor remembering the waters of Mansa with longing

"Behold, close by, a hill that rises to the skies whose summit sparkles with the gleam of sapphires set in golden plantain trees Silvered by thy lightning I picture that precious hillock my heart wrenched within me, for it was loved dearly by my beloved one

"Upon this glorious height, with its blossoms waving in the wind like a red flag, stands a joyous *asoka*, rising up to greet thee with love, whilst its sister the sweet-scented *bahula*, grows close by its side Nigh to them, growing in grace and ineffable charm, thou'lt find the red-blossoming *madhavi* tree, fondly embraced by the clinging *lurabala*, — the one longing for a touch of my beloved the other for a breath of her sweet mouth

"There, in the midst of all this riotous colour, behold the bright-hued peacock seated on a golden perch, who dances his mad dance of ecstasy, to the tune of my beloved's song, and the clapping of her little hands tinkling with gay bells

O faithful Cloud! know by these same trees, and the

sign of the Conch-shell and Lotus-flower upon my door that this is indeed my very home, the place where my beloved now lives alone, — desolate widowed, pathetic, pining for her lord, robbed of all her natural loveliness and lustre, like a flower that wilts before the blasting winds

"And now, dear Messenger, without further ado, rest upon the lap of that gleaming sapphire hill whereon grows the profusion of gorgeous trees, narrowing thy size to its proportions, thence to throw thy tremulous lightning-radiance with gentle force into my house — that house of love wherein dwells my soul, my joy, my life!

"Thou'lt see her there — my own! — with her exquisite face and form of ethereal grace, her cherry lips and smile of pearly radiance, her eyes soft as a gazelle's — as restlessly she walks about the house, a pale picture of feminine perfection, — a prey to grief and sorrow, to unbearable agony of body and soul

"So shalt thou know her, O Cloud, and by the unbroken silence all around her, for quiet grown must be my love, since I, her lord, was banished from her sight. Aye, like a mournful duck doth my dearest one bemoan her sad fate, silently lamenting her lost love, her beauty withered by the winter of darkness surrounding all her, sweet soul

"Alas! my beloved's face, like a moon darkened by thy shadowy countenance, will show pensive and pale, as distraught and weeping, she sits with brooding glance, her once beautiful locks a dishevelled mass of thick entanglement, and sigh upon sigh escaping her trembling lips. Behold, O darkling Onlooker, how grievously she pines for her absent lord

"Ah, thy fortunate gaze may now rest upon her as tenderly she makes her little offering to the birds her dwelling upon her loved one's image

"Ah, sweet bird," cries she in anguish to her little winged friend in its prisoned cage 'Knowest thou not

her pale brow, and pines for dream-filled slumber, that she might meet me at least in spirit, if not in flesh

"O wretched one, whose restless hands do constantly and painfully tug at that hard, single braid of unbrushed hair that was plaited with tears, putting away the garland of flowers, on that fatal day that witnessed our parting, take heart, for that hour, too, shall come when, my exile ended, I shall unbraid it with mine own hands!

"O great-hearted one, when thou dost see that helpless form lying prone upon the hard ground, weak trembling and lifeless, then shalt thou feel the dint of pity wrench the sorrowful tears out of thee, making them fall upon my house in the form of gracious rain-drops

"Think not, O Cloud, that I am filled with vain-glorious bombast and self-trumpeting conceit, because I speak thus of my love. Not so — but because I know the affectionate heart of her I adore, that makest me to imagine her thus. If thou dost doubt it, O noble Messenger, thine own eyes will soon be a witness to my beloved's great grief at this our first parting

"My beautiful one, though pale with pining, will no doubt greet thy hopeful approach with a quivering of her lovely eyes, like dew-wet lotus blossoms upon which the fishes play, dulled though they must be with lack of wine

"Troubled no more by the marks of my too-passionate hands, her golden-skinned thigh, now innocent of its double-stringed girdle of pearls, will quiver in anticipation of Love's delights to come, as thou dost wait to speak to her my message of love and hope

"Should it chance O goodly Messenger that my beloved has at last fallen into blissful dream-filled slumber, which my arms, in fancy, clasp her tightly to my breast, then, O merciful one let not the rumbling roar of thy thunder waken her rudely from her dreams, but refrain for the period of a watch at least

'Then waken her gently, if thou wilt, by the soft winds playing caressingly upon her face, by the gentle patter of raindrops upon her window-sill, by the sweet fragrance of opening jasmine blossoms that assail her delicate nostrils

"When at last her dark orbs, like blossoming *ketaka* buds, have opened to thee in astonishment, then do thou begin to speak to her of her love, and she will listen to thee in wonder her dear face lighting up to hear the magic words

"Say to her then, O Cloud 'O thou beauteous one, hearken to me well, I pray thee for I come to deliver a message from thy beloved one who yet lives, though so cruelly parted from thee, his life—But a humble Cloud am I, yet prone to help lonely wayfarers along their weary path, when homeward bound to their mistresses they trudge'

"Then will that proud mistress of mine gaze upon thee joyfully, a smile of radiant surprise upon her mobile face Avidly she listens to thy words of hope and cheer, for there is naught under Heaven sweeter to a wife's ears than news of her absent lord

"Tell her, O Bearer of Good Tidings, 'Fair one, thy husband, who lives the life of a hermit on Ramagiri height, mourning thy loss, makes tender enquiry about thee, for easily prone to accidents and calamities are mere mortals

"Though separated from thee by fate's cruel decree, in his mind thy love is constantly united to thee, O thou frail and emaciated one, who art ever pining for thy lord with hot tears and soul-searing sighs that drain the blood from thy face, and the lustre from thine eyes, even as he is grown pale and haggard for want of thee, his countenance riven by furrows of sorrow and weeping

"Once upon a time, thy dear one would speak to thee sweet words of love whilst caressing thy velvet cheek Alas! since he can no more do so, he hath commissioned me to speak for him,—words wrung from his heart by

the force of his great grief

"'O lovely one,' (he bade me say), 'since I cannot alas! look upon thy radiant face and form, I fasten my eyes upon the beauteous *priyangu* creeper, and imagine it to be thee, even as I look into the soft eyes of the gentle gazelle, and make believe they are thine, or the round face of the moon that bears so strong a resemblance to thine, or see in the peacock's tails thy brightly gleaming locks, whilst every ripple of water suggests the winged arches of thy delicate brows

"'But alas! not all of these can vie with thee, O cherished one, nor rival thy grace, beauty, charm, or radiance. In vain do I try to conjure up a true picture of thee, love, by drawing thy fair image upon a black stone, with me at thy feet, adoring thee. Alas! the gods are so far jealous of human happiness that they will not permit us a meeting, even in this imaginary fashion for mine eyes are blinded by hot tears that prevent me finishing the picture

"'But even the gods do feel the dint of pity at my misery, as they hear me cry out to thee in vain mine arms held out to fold thee in the imaginary embrace, as in a vision of happy unreality I do picture thy beauteous form. For lo and behold! tears, large as the pearls of the ocean, fall fast upon the tree-tops, glistening brightly in the magic starlight

"'O faithful one, if thou couldst but see thy fond love kissing the cool breezes that flow down to the South from the heavenly Himalayas, bearing with them the fragrance of the divine *deodars* that have but lately caressed all thy sweet body, thou wouldst smile through thy tears at thy lover's great folly! But would it not joy thee, too, to think how madly thy slave doth dote upon thee?"

"'Oh, how slow-moving and full of pain are the hours of the night, now that thou art no more beside me, love, when once they passed by with such fleeting swiftness! And how tiresome the hot days when the heat of love's frenzy and frustration burn me with their scorching

intensity I would the gods might grant me balm for my sorrow! Yet tis a prayer uttered in vain I know for who but thee love doth possess the power to bring peace to my soul or comfort to my heart?

"O my dear one do not I pray thee give way constantly to despair—though tis all too easy I know!—but keep up thy spirits even as I essay to do by thinking of the days to come when re-united at last we may once more live the life nearest to our hearts desires. Therefore take courage fair one for 'twas never in the nature of things to remain stagnant or stationary and so with Fortune, who must turn her wheel ever round and round favouring now one now another of her subjects. For whoever liveth who was happy always or sorrowful always? Then smile sweet one and be glad in anticipation of the bliss to come

"When the day dawns that sees the end of this accursed separation of ours when Vishnu arises from his couch of sleep at last, then—oh then!—most happy thought!—will begin the days of our glory and the nights of our joy. Together we shall court the live-long day and passion at night to our hearts content when the full moon shall shed her bright indulgence all around, smiling upon two souls that are as one

"If, O Cloud she still hath any doubts left about thy authority say to her Dost thou not remember the night' (saith thy love) 'when with thy arms wound tightly around my neck thou didst fall asleep and after a while, wake up with a start sobbing as though thy heart would break? Gently I soothed thee when thou didst tell me the cause of thy weeping I didst dream," saith thou between thy sobs 'that thou didst lie in another's arms Oh, 'twas a nightmare too terrible to behold! Then I lulled thee to sleep again happy as a child

'O thou too jealous one, art thou now satisfied that this message comes indeed from thy true love's lips? Then list not to the deceitful gossips of the world, who prattle with ease and seeming authority of things they

reck not of, nor heed the lying words of worldly wise-
acres, who hold forth on the defection of lovers who
are absent! One truth I have learnt, O my passionate
one As the days multiply and pile one upon another
in a frenzy of suspense and torture, and I agonise for
thee in vain, my love for thee doth multiply a hundred-
fold, collecting within my breast without let or release'

"O dear Messenger-Cloud, after thou hast bidden fare-
well to my fair one, with many kind words of love and
hope to blunt the edge of her grief, do thou hasten away
from that mountain of glory, traversing the route over
which thou didst lately journey, to bring me back tidings
of my beloved, else my life hath known its ebb for ever
like jasmine blossoms that wither in the storm

"O generous-hearted and full of pity, shall I then be
indebted to thee for this gesture of love? Thou makest
no answer! Yet silence, the world knows, doth ever
mean consent Do not the *catakas* thirst for thy water,
and receive it without a murmur? So doth a man of
virtue and worth help those in need, without trumpeting
forth his good deeds before the world

"When thou hast fulfilled my behest out of compassion
generosity, or charity, then full blown and full of water
O beautiful one, mayest thou wander at thy will, indulg-
ing thy fancy wherever it may please to lead thee

"But this above all, is my prayer for thee, friend, that
thou mayest never, never for a moment know the agony
of parting from thy glamorous, silver-sheathed bride, the
slender, shimmering Lightning-light'

INDEX AND GLOSSARY

A

- Agni*, the God of Fire
Agni, an ointment for blackening the eyes
Amnas, the last day of the lunar half-month
Apsara, a nymph of heaven
Asoka, one of the most beautiful Indian trees, with large blossoms in shades of orange, scarlet, pale yellow, and bright orange
Aswamedha, the Horse Sacrifice, the final of a series of a hundred sacrifices, the accomplishment of which was supposed to give one the status of Indra, the god of the sky For this sacrifice, the victim horse was allowed to roam at will for a year before being offered up

B

- Babarchikhana*, kitchen
Balua, another name for the *kesara*
Bala, *Atibala*, magic words for invoking supernatural strength and powers
Balarama, the Brave, whose weapon was a ploughshare, was a brother of Krishna, and is depicted as being very fair of complexion, with white hair In order to atone for the sin of killing Suta, the charioteer, he had to bathe in the Saraswati
Bali, a Daitya or demon, who granted to Vishnu, in his

incarnation as a Dwarf, as much land as the latter could measure in three steps, whereupon Vishnu assumed the form of an immense giant, and in three paces took possession of the heavens, the earth, and the abode of the gods, casting Bali down into *Patala*

Bhavani, mother of the war-god, *Skanda*

Bow of Siva, Siva's mighty bow, treasured by generations of kings, which neither god nor man could break until the coming of *Rama*

Brahma, the Supreme Soul, the Creator in the Hindu Trinity of Gods

Brahmavarta, the holy city of the Aryans, situated to the north-east of Delhi, between two rivers

C

Camara, fly-whisk made from a yak's tail

Cataka, an Indian bird which subsists on rain-water alone

Chakravaka, the Brahmani duck, which is extremely loving, and a symbol of conjugal love and affection but destined to part from its mate every night when it calls piteously to it from the opposite side of a river

Champak, a variety of Indian magnolia, with yellow flowers emitting a strong fragrance

Chandra, the Moon God

Choli, the tight-fitting bodice worn by an Indian woman with the *sari*

D

Daityas, a race of giants who were the sworn enemies of the gods. They were confined to *Patala* by Indra

Dha grass, a kind of grass considered sacred by the Hindus

Darnas, ten forts or citadels

Deodars, trees of the gods, which give off a fragrant

aromatic scent

Dhai, curds

Dinnagas, guardian elephants of the eight points of the compass

Durvasas, a choleric saint given to curses and imprecations, with dreadful consequences to his victims

Dwarf, incarnation of Vishnu as the Dwarf Vamana for the purpose of vanquishing the demon Bali

F

Feria, travelling hawker or cheap-jack

G

Gandharvas, musicians and minstrels of Indra's heaven

Gauri, wife of Siva.

Ghee, clarified buffalo-milk butter, commonly used for cooking in India

Ghulab-jhamb, a juicy Indian sweetmeat

Gopati, or the Lord of Kine, title given to Vishnu in his incarnation as Krishna, the Cowherd

I

Ilshvaku, the son of Manu, the seventh of the fourteen Manus mentioned in Hindu mythology

Indra, the God of the Sky, also referred to as the God of Thunder

Ingudi, fruit of a tree known as *Ingua*, from which is extracted an oil used for lamps, and for making ointments

J

Jah!, an exclamation signifying "Go to!" or "Go on!"

Jabru's Mad, the name of a river, supposed to have flown out of the ear of a sage named Jahnu

Jambu-tree, rose-apple tree

Jatayu, King of the Vultures

K

Kadamba, a tree with orange-coloured blossoms

Kalanemi, a *Daitya* or demon with one hundred arms and legs

Kama, the God of Love, who is represented as holding a bow made of sugar-cane, and arrows tipped with flowers, (including the mango-blossom), which he aimed at the heart through the five senses

Kandali, a flowering tree with tiny, dark-centred blossoms

Kesara, also called the *bakula*, whose flowers are extremely decorative and strongly scented

Ketaka, a tree with pale yellow flowers

Kimnaras, legendary, creatures, half human and half animal, who served Kuvera, the God of Wealth

Koil, the Indian cuckoo, whose song is full of melody and charm. The mother leaves her eggs to be hatched in a crow's nest

Kshatriya, the military aristocrat, or warrior caste

Kum-kum, the red powder with which a married woman's forehead is marked

Kurabaka, a tree with purple-coloured flowers

Kurukshetra, the battle-field of Kurukshetra, near Panipat, where the famous battle between the Kurus and Pandavas was fought

Kutaja, a tree with white blossoms

Kuvera, the God of Wealth, who is synonymous to the Greek Plutus

L

ra, a tree whose leaves are widely used for medicinal purposes

M

- Madhavi*, a tree with red flowers, which is a great favourite with Indian poets
- Mandara*, an evergreen tree of the garden of Indra's heaven, *Nandana*
- Meru*, Hindu equivalent of the legendary Greek Mount Olympus
- Moghras*, a plant with little white flowers having a heady fragrance
- Muni*, a saint or recluse

N

- Naga-king*, King of the demoniac Cobras
- Namaste*, Indian form of greeting, made with folded hands, suiting the action to the word
- Niculas*, a species of Indian reed growing on land
- Nikumbha*, one of the lesser-known Indian deities

P

- Paharis*, inhabitants of mountainous regions
- Panchavati*, ancient name of Nasik
- Pan-supari*, betel-leaf with areca-nut universally chewed in India by all classes
- Parasu-Rama*, an incarnation of Vishnu who was the sworn enemy of the *Kshatriya* or military caste, and had twenty-one times swept them from the face of the earth, beginning with his own mother
- Parijata*, the celestial, evergreen wishing-tree of *Nandana*, India's heavenly garden
- Parvaha*, the heavens, according to legend are divided into seven paths or orbits, with different winds assigned to each. The path of the *Parvaha* is the sixth of these
- Patala*, the region of the Underworld, beneath the floor of the ocean where dwell the giants and demons,

- and the hooded snakes called the Nagas
Poonam, the night of the full moon
Prajapati, one of the ten sons of Brahma, supposed to be progenitors of mankind
Priyangu, a creeper whose flowers open up at the touch of a woman's hand

R

- Rahu*, a demon who is supposed to swallow the sun and the moon periodically, thus causing eclipses
Raj, throne
Rakshasas, demon spirits of fearful aspect who troubled the rites of the pious, until Vishnu incarnate as Rama came upon earth to vanquish them in battle
Rama-with-the-Axe, another name for Parasu-Rama who is supposed to have cut a passage through the Himalayas with his axe, when on his way to slay the hated Kshatriya race
Rantideva, an ancient king of Dasapura, who performed a mighty Sacrifice of Cows, the blood from which formed the river Charmanvati, or Chambal
Revati, the wife of Balarama, the Brave
Rigveda, An ancient Hindu Scripture, being the most important of the four vedas

S

- Salna*, a common Indian dish made with potatoes, spices greens and chillies, and cooked in oil
Sapta-parna, a tree which has seven leaves on a stalk
Sarabhas, fabulous creatures with eight legs supposed to have existed in ancient times who were fierce enough to withstand lions and tigers
the six to nine yards of graceful draperies that form the Indian woman's national costume
Sas, the swan, or the ruddy goose
tabash' exclamation meaning "well done!"

Shakunta, a bird

Sipra, the name of a river which flows by the city of Ujjain, now called the Sippara

Siva, the Destroyer in the Hindu Trinity of Gods, he is represented as wielding a trident and a might bow, and having a blue throat, from the effect of drinking the poison produced at the churning of the ocean

Skanda, the war-god, also called the Youth Eternal

Sri, or Laxmi, the wife of Vishnu, and the Goddess of Beauty, Love, and Prosperity

Sudra, non-Aryan, of the aborigine, or "black" caste

Sarabhi, the legendary Cow of Plenty, and granter of human desires

Swayamvara, a ceremony at which an Indian princess of marriageable age chose herself a husband from among a host of kings princes, and warriors assembled together for the purpose

T

Thallas, trays

Tilak, red mark on the forehead of a married woman

Trisanku, a religious-minded king belonging to the solar race, who desired to climb to heaven in human form by offering a mighty sacrifice After several unsuccessful attempts, he at last enlisted the help of the sage Viswamitra, who invoked the gods' help When the latter refused to co-operate, Viswamitra himself sent Trisanku to the heavens, whence he was hurled back to earth by the gods The Saint's power, however, cut short his downward progress, so that he was left dangling in mid-air, and turned into a constellation of stars

V

Vanar, ape

Varuna, the God of Ocean

- and the hooded snakes called the Nagas
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V

Vanar, ape

Varuna, the God of Ocean

Vishnu, the Preserver in the Hindu Trinity of Gods, who became incarnate in various forms to protect the world from demons

Y

Yaksa, supernatural beings in the service of Kuvera, God of Wealth

Yama, the God of Death and Justice

Yuvarajah, heir-apparent

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—Sir Edwin Arnold
- J 5 DROLL STORIES—Balzac
- J 6 VISION OF INDIA—Sisirkumar Mitra
- J 7 AMONG THE GREAT—Dilip Kumar Roy
- J 8 MY CHILDHOOD—Maxim Gorky
- J 9 MY UNIVERSITIES—Maxim Gorky
- J 10 IN THE WORLD—Maxim Gorky
- J 11 FOUR GREAT HISTORICAL PLAYS OF—William
Shakespeare
- J 12 FOUR GREAT TRAGEDIES OF—William Shakespeare
- J 13 FOUR GREAT COMEDIES OF—William Shakespeare
- J 14 WUTHERING HEIGHTS—Emily Bronte
- J 15 A TALE OF TWO CITIES—Charles Dickens
- J 16 PRIDE AND PREJUDICE—Jane Austen
- J 17 THE GREAT SHORT STORIES—Guy de Maupassant
- J 18 NANA—Emile Zola
- J 19 ANNA KARENINA—Leo Tolstoy
- J 20 THE LIBERATOR—Sisirkumar Mitra
- J 21 EMMA—Jane Austen
- J 22 HE WHO RIDES A TIGER—Bhabhani Bhattacharya
- J 23 INQILAB—Khvaja Ahmad Abbas
- J 24 THE SUBSTANCE OF A DREAM—F W Bain
- J 25 THE NATIONAL CULTURE OF INDIA—Dr S Abid
Husain
- J 26 THE GOLDEN BOAT—Rabindranath Tagore
- J 27 NECTAR IN A SIEVE—Kamala Markandaya
- J 28 SOMADEVA S VETALAPANCAH VIMSATI—C H Tawney
- J 29 CASANOVA'S MEMOIRS—Joseph Monet
- J 30 CAMILLE—Alexandre Dumas

- J 31 OUR HEARTS—Guy de Maupassant
- J 32 MADEMOISELLE DE MAUPIN—Theophile Gautier
- J 33 THE WISDOM OF INDIA—Lin Yutang
- J 34 A DIGIT OF THE MOON AND A DRAUGHT OF THE
BLUE—F W Bain
- J 35 UNTOUCHABLE—Mulk Raj Anand
- J 36 THE LIVING THOUGHTS OF GOTAMA THE BUDDHA
—Ananda K Coomaraswami and I B Horner
- J 37 THAIS—Anatole France
- J 38 SENSE AND SENSIBILITY—Jane Austen
- J 39 SOMADEVAS KATHASARITSAGARA—C H Tawney
- J 40 CREATURES OF DESTINY—S Muzumdar
- J 41 MAHATMA GANDHI ESSAYS AND REFLECTIONS—
Edited by Dr S Radhakrishnan
- J 42 FAREWELL MY FRIEND & THE GARDEN—Rabindra
nath Tagore
- J 43 THE ART OF LIVING—T K Dutt
- J 44 ECONOMICS IN ONE LESSON—Henry Hazlitt
- J 45 YOU MUST RELAX—E Jacobson
- J 46 THE PROFESSOR—Charlotte Bronte
- J 47 THE WISDOM OF CHINA—Lin Yutang
- J 48 BOOK OF FACTS
- J 49 TREASURY OF WIT & HUMOUR
- J 50 THE WHIRLWIND—Prof N S Phadke
- J 51 SIDDHARTHA MAN OF PEACE—Harindranath
Chattopadhyaya
- J 52 GODAN—Premchand
- J 53 BANABHATTA'S KADAMBARI—C M Ridding
- J 54 THE LIVING THOUGHTS OF CONFUCIUS—Alfred
Doeblin
- J 55 THE LIVING THOUGHTS OF KARL MARX—Leon
Trotsky
- J 56 THE LIVING THOUGHTS OF VOLTAIRE—Andre Mau
rols
- J 57 MOTHER—Grazia Deledda
- J 58 THE PICTURE-STORY BOOK OF LEO TOLSTOY'S
WAR & PEACE—Bernard Gels
- J 59 THE TEN PRINCES—Arthur W Ryder
- J 60 CHITRALEKHA—Bhagwati Charan Verma

- J 61 TEARS AND LAUGHTER—Kahlil Gibran
- J 62 INDIAN COOKERY—E P Veerasawmy
- J 63 BEL-AMI—Guy de Maupassant
- J 64 THE SONG CELESTIAL—Edwin Arnold
- J 65 THE INVISIBLE MAN—H. G Wells
- J 66 WHAT IS CREATIVE THINKING—Katharine Patrick
- J 67 STORIES FROM BENGAL—Dr S Dutt
- J 68 LAUGH WITH LEACOCK—Stephen Leacock
- J 69 GETTING THE MOST OUT OF LIFE—C G L DuCann
- J 70 LETTER-WRITING IMPROVED—J S Bright
- J 71 NAPOLEON—Emil Ludwig
- J 72 JATAKA TALES—H. T Francis & E J Thomas
- J 73 THE HISTORY OF MR POLLY—H G Wells
- J 74 THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD—Oliver Goldsmith
- J 75 ONE THOUSAND NIGHTS ON A BED OF STONES
AND OTHER STORIES—K. A Abbas
- J 76 YOUR MIND AND HOW TO USE IT—W J Ennever
- J 77 SOME INNER FURY—Kamala Markandaya
- J 78 LOVE AND MR LEWISHAM—H. G Wells
- J 79 THE SPELL OF APHRODITE AND OTHER STORIES—
S K Chettur
- J 80 TALES FROM KALIDASA—Suna K Surveyor
- J 81 THE FIRST MEN IN THE MOON—H G Wells
- J 82 MEMORY EFFICIENCY—S Louis Orton
- J 83 WHERE ANGELS SELL EGGS AND OTHER STORIES
—Prof N S Phadke
- J 84 THROUGH THE JUNGLES OF BRAZIL—Tibor Sekelj
- J 85 HOW WE SPEAK—Frank Jones
- J 86 THE JUNGLE—Upton Sinclair
- J 87 LAUGHTER AND APPLAUSE—Allen M Laing
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bility of her nature

"What a noble creature!" thought she "She is even
inch a Queen and certainly deserves the title of Em-
press and Goddess for she possesses no less dignity or
beauty than Heaven's own Queen And her lofty words
make me feel all uplifted and pure inside"

With the completion of her vow, the Queen departed
with her attendants leaving Pururavas in a pensive mood

"Ah" he sighed heavily "If only Urvasie could now
descend with her tinkling anklets, and cover my eyes
with her beautiful petal-soft hands"

A tumultuous joy welled up within Urvasie's heart as
she heard these words of the King She longed to go to
him but her innate shyness yet stayed her At last egged
on by Chitralekha she stole up behind the pining Pururava-
vas and covered his eyes with her cool lotus fingers

With an exclamation of delight, the King caught her
hands in his own

"The hands of my beloved!" he cried ecstatically "—
of her whose touch is sweetness No other hands but
these could heal all my sick repining"

Drawing her forward, Pururavas gazed in rapture at
the lovely nymph who looked inexpressibly appealing
and irresistible in a trysting-dress of midnight blue silk
with exquisite blue diamonds shimmering upon her
creamy throat and in her pink shell-like ears

"Welcome, enchantress!" exclaimed the intoxicated
lover sweeping the ravishing nymph into his arms and
covering her with hungry, passionate kisses Again and
again he kissed her—upon her coral mouth, her eyes
her hair, her soft white bosom, her graceful, swan-like
throat—maddened by her beauty, her proximity, by the
moonlight, by the enchantment of that magic mid-
night hour that sent the blood reeling in his veins and
made his pulse beat faster and faster

Meanwhile Chitrlekha had tactfully drawn the Prah-
man away and engaged him in alluring conversation

"Beautiful — Beloved — My own!" murmured Puru-

ravas exultantly, as he pressed Urvasie's soft, yielding form closer to his own

"I would be too bold to let you embrace me like this, my lord," declared Urvasie, breathless but radiant with love's joy, "were it not that your Queen had given you to me!"

"Oh," said the king, enchanted "Then by whose permission, may I ask, did you steal my heart away?—But tell me," continued Pururavas, his eyes darkening with fear "You will not fly back to your Heaven again, will you, dearest?"

Then Urvasie shyly related to the king how Indra himself had sent her to him

"Then am I eternally indebted to the mighty king of Heaven!" cried Pururavas joyfully "I swear to thee, love, thou shall not miss thy heaven, though that seems impossible! — From henceforth, I shall be thy slave, and shall do all thy bidding "

"Dear my lord!" murmured Urvasie tremulously "I've never been so happy before, even in Heaven "

"What a difference love makes to everything in life!" enthused the moon-struck lover "These brilliant rays that lately scorched and burned me,—how soothing and gentle do they seem now! The sharp arrows of love that but an hour ago bruised and wounded my heart, now caress it like the soft petals of a flower All the sights and sounds around that once appeared so harsh and discordant now fall like sweet music upon my ears since I have thee in my arms, beloved!"

"Dear lord, I am to blame for making you suffer so!" cried Urvasie with compunction "I should have come to you earlier "

"Nay, sweet, do not say so," replied Pururavas tenderly "The happiness that comes after suffering and pain is ever keener and sweeter for that very reason—I have only one wish left to be fulfilled now When thou wast not in my arms, the nights seemed painfully long Now that I hold thy dear face upon my bosom, I would the hours of the night were longer!"

Nor did the transported lover feel aught of love's sorrow, for his need of the beautiful Urvashi was too deep too urgent too basic, to be denied or easily satisfied.

CHAPTER IV

ON A FINE summer afternoon in June, just before the outbreak of the monsoon, Urvashi and Pururava amorously sojourning on a honeymoon holiday, walked arm-in-arm upon the delightful green fields of Gandhamadana forest within view of the snowy mountains whose sublime heights sparkled in the fitful sunlight like a necklace of priceless diamonds.

Like two happy children, the carefree pair sported merrily upon the green-carpeted sward, picking the stony anemones that lay wild at their feet, plucking the red berries that grew in profusion upon the bramble bushes, jumping over crags and boulders that held still, small pools of clear water, or gazing in ecstasy at the tall pine trees silhouetted against the misty blue-white mountains. The restless birds twittered and sang their cadenzas of welcome to the monsoon, in joyous expectation of the rain-drops to come.

The balmy air was charged with electric excitement, as a dazzling golden-green light shed its unearthly aura over all the earth, surrounding it with an ethereal radiance. All nature seemed eager and expectant and hopeful looking up to the pregnant clouds, with their precious burden of water.

the momentary parting

The minutes passed, but no fond Pururavas came to seek her. Intrigued, Urvasie peeped from behind the boulder, to see her Pururavas gazing with admiration upon a pretty *Pahari* maid holding a lamp in her arms, whose lotus face and laughing eyes were upturned to his own. Jealous, unreasonable rage tore at her breast at the sight. Blazing with fury, she came out of her hiding-place, and tempestuously upbraided her lover for his negligence.

"You do not love me!" she stormed, tears of rage glistening upon her lashes. "Or you would not leave me to run after this—this tattered, pug-faced, untidy little slut!"

"Urvasie!" exclaimed the King in amazement. "You don't know what you are saying!—Leave you, dearest! How could you think such a thing?"

But the enraged nymph refused to be mollified. Wilfully she turned her back upon the King, and walked away towards the forest of Kumara, into that grove forbidden to women,—that sacred grove which the war-god, Kartikeya, had decreed no woman could enter but would immediately be turned into a creeper! Alas! Poor Urvasie! In her angry, impulsive haste, she recked not of the god's vow, but rushed in where even angels fear to tread,—and lo! was immediately transformed into a creeper! The divine, peerless Urvasie a creeper!—'Twas a fate more horrible than words can describe.

And what of Pururavas, her passionate slave and lover? Who can picture his grief and sorrow at finding his beloved vanished into thin air before his very eyes? He rushed hither and thither like a madman, calling her name,—begging, pleading, coaxing, praying, demanding that she return to him. In vain he cried out to the rolling heavens and the sighing winds, sobbing in anguished horror.

'Oh, Urvasie! Urvasie! My love!' he wept. "What! Gone? Disappeared at a word?—But why? What was the great fault thy Pururavas didst commit, love?—Alas!

—Alack! Oh woe the day! I'll cut off my right hand to make thee amends sweet,—only come back to me—come back to thy love!—Do not punish thy Pururavas so!

Though the broken-hearted king raved and ranted like a madman Urvastī alas! did not appear. Night and day the luckless lover sought his beloved like one demented his appearance disordered and dishevelled his eyes wild with the despair and frenzy of love's madness. Pathetically he addressed the elements—the animals and birds in the sky—appealing to them to help him find his Urvastī.

Where oh where shall I find her?' he questioned them with child-like poignancy. "Has she thrown a veil of invisibility around herself using her celestial powers to tease and punish me?—But though she was quick to anger she was just as quick to forgive. Has she flown back to her Heaven once more?—Nay she was burning and hot with love for me. No power on earth could have lured her away from me!—Yet she is gone,—gone!—vanished into nothingness. O bitter, bitter fortune!" Prostrated with grief, Pururavas fell upon the ground in a swoon. But before long he rose unsteadily to his feet again to resume the fruitless search.

"Alas! Misfortunes never come singly," thought the King bitterly. "How shall I bear the pain of separation from my love with these cool monsoon days upon us?—Ah! they will surely kill me! Lo these tender *Kandall* blossoms—how much they remind me of her lovely eyes, her clinging to quick tears—Hail do I see a sign of her? Is that the bright green *choh* with crimson dots that held in its precious, gurgling breasts? I'll gather 'em up in my arms—Oh, my blundering heart! 'tis only green—'tis green—but 'twas upon it!—But who shall I ever remember in all this bleak, desolate forest?—I gazed at that blue parakeet if his eyes have been so bright—delight—But he only laughs at my folly—'tis a creature! He knows he has no more

rival left upon earth since my Urvasie disappeared—alas! who knows where?—For when her gorgeous, wavy tresses spread out upon the bed in a magnificent mass around her ravishingly white shoulders, who then cared for his brilliant feathers?—But I shall not question him any more—he takes joy in my sorrow—Look, there sits the cuckoo on yonder tree He is a wise little bird, well versed in the ways of love I'll ask him Tell me sweet bird, whither went my Urvasie? What, thou turnest away inattentively to attend to thine own business?—Fie upon thee, bird, who art called the ambassador of love! Yet I have not the heart to scold thee! Live thou in bliss, gentle bird, though I go away heart-broken—Hark! Did I hear her anklets tinkling? O wretched truth! 'twas no anklets' music I heard, but the cry of swans who feel home-sick and nostalgic for the Himalayan lakes Wilt thou bring me tidings of my love, oh silver swan? Sawest thou her I pine for? How then canst thou imitate so well her graceful walk full of sensuous rhythm? But unmindful of my grief thou dost vanish into the air—I shall have to turn elsewhere to seek my love,—for ever seek her”

With a sigh, the exhausted Pururavas lurched heavily forward, his foot-steps dragging, but a loud thunder-bolt threw him upon the ground, as streaks of lightning flashed menacingly through the darkening trees, bringing showers of quick, driving rain

“Oh, rain,” said the king despairingly, “thou dost come too late with thy promise of cool, pleasant days She's gone,—my Urvasie! With whom now should I share the splendour of the monsoon?—But I am the King of the World, am I not? I shall order the rains and the thunder back to the heavens—Yet no, let the season suffer unabated its marvellous glories”

Once more Pururavas plunged forward into the dark jungles, drenched to the skin, mud upon his limbs and in his eyes, his clothes bespattered,—a sorry spectacle for the King of the Universe, to whom the Lord of Heaven

himself paid homage. At last, spent of their main force the clouds abated their fury raining gentle drops upon the King as though to soften the rigours of his harsh misfortune.

'Ah these are gracious drops of pity," sighed the King. 'Heaven itself is moved, and mourns my beloved's loss—Oh wild drake tell me didst thou see my love playing like a happy child in the springtime?—I Pururvas King of the Universe do ask it of thee. What! Dost thou ask me who I am? Is it possible thou knowest not who I am—I even I the king of kings, Earth's chosen master and greatest of all, the beloved of Urvashi!—But thou makest no answer.

On *chakrataka* bird thou knowest true love's desperate yearning for I have heard thee in the pool, wailing the saddest wildest dirge of distress, yet thou wilt not give me news of my love!—I must go deeper and deeper into the wood.

A sweet lotus blossom with the bees murmuring in it—thou dost remind me of my love's rosebud mouth when I crushed it too passionately making her cry out in exquisite pain. Ah, dear lips, whose intoxicating nectar I have sucked a million times,—my senses reeling!—where are you now?

The celestial mountain now comes into view. Ill gazing at it O beautiful mountain, beloved of the celestials! dost thou Urvashi's self, full of spring?"

— "Beautiful mountain beloved of the celestials! dost thou Urvashi's self, full of spring?" answered the echo from the mountain transporting the half-crazed Pururva, to a world of fabled delight.

Heaven's own rapt and overjoyed monarch. "Then I did find my beloved in thy deep green wood,"
— "Dost thou find my beloved in thy deep green wood,"

love!"

Overcome with grief and exhaustion, Pururavas fell into a swoon, merciful oblivion descending upon his tortured, delirious mind, racked by nights and days of unspeakable anguish and suffering. When consciousness returned to plague him once more, the King cursed the evil fate that kept him alive when it took his Urvasie from him.

"Would that I were dead!" exclaimed the king bitterly. "Black despair fills my soul to the brim,—I have drunk my cup of bitterness to the dregs!"

But his native resolution soon asserting itself, Pururavas arose with an effort, lifting himself up out of the lethargy and listlessness of shock and grief, dragging his footsteps back over the wet rich earth, fragrant with the smell of the first rains that was like balm to his jagged nerves.

"I must not give in," thought Pururavas resolutely. "I will search until I find her,—I shall return to the spot where I lost her."

Arrived at the place, Pururavas stopped short in his tracks looking hopefully around as he invoked a silent prayer in his mind. As if in answer, his eyes fell upon a bright, scarlet object that gleamed and sparkled as though shot through with fire, where it lay upon the ground amid a heap of stones. Its radiant, flaming lustre attracted the King's notice, despite his distraction. He stooped to pick it up, then thought better of it.

"Alas! she whose beauty it should have adorned, is lost to me for ever," thought the king sadly. "What use then to pick it up, only to weep over it?"

But suddenly out of the blue, came a deep bass voice. "Reject not this stone, my son, for it is the jewel named 'Union' made out of the red lac, and whosoever wears it will soon be united with his love."

"Ha!" cried the king. "Who speaks to me? Is it the voice of a holy one who dwells in the forest? He is the first creature to take pity on me!—Oh, anchorite, I give

thee thanks'—Thou O lovely gem if thou wilt indeed end this unbearable separation from my beloved I'll wear thee upon my heart And picking up the gem Pururavas kissed it reverently

Immediately his eyes became riveted upon a creeper that grew at his right elbow Though devoid of flowers it seemed to hold a strange fascination for the King

'What is it about this creeper that draws me to it so strongly?' thought Pururavas wonderingly "It reminds me somehow of my beloved though I know not why—Perhaps because it stands all forlorn and desolate, with its moist drooping leaves as though streaming with tears"—It might be my quick-tempered impulsive darling shedding tears of remorse for having broken my heart' ———I will embrace it It is so like her———Urvashi! Methinks I hold Urvashi in my arms My whole body is thrilled as by the touch of her dear body—But I cannot believe it—too often have I been deceived!

Yet dare I open my eyes?—Why!—'tis thou! My very love! Urvashi! Pururavas' voice died away in a gasp of amazement and joy as he faintly the shock of finding the nymph at last, overwhelming his exhausted and overwrought frame

'Art thou my dearest lord arise!' pleaded Urvashi trying to rouse the swooning King

'I loved! I live again!' exclaimed Pururavas joyfully O what a black slough of despair and grief didst thou draw me into!

'I am so dear my lord for making you suffer so!' implored Urvashi tearfully "With inward agony I have endured your whole travail"

Could Pururavas ever be angry with his Urvashi? No! He only wondered 'But tell me, love why didst

"What appeared dark and incomprehensible a few minutes ago seems so easy to understand now!" exclaimed Pururavas in wonder "But how didst thou bear this separation between us for so long love,—thou that didst always cry out if I loosened thee for a moment from my embrace?"

"Nay, remind me not of the agony of separation! 'Tis too painful to dwell upon!" cried the nymph plaintively "Let us be thankful that we are united again by the power of this blessed jewel"

Womanwise, Urvasie placed the gem against her white throat

"How does it look?" she asked shyly

"Fairest," murmured the king fondly "I can find no words to describe thee! Thy face, aglow with a crimson blush, is like a rose at sunset, the fiery rays from the gem adding splendour and radiance to thy loveliness"

"Oh, you flatterer!" cried Urvasie happily "Have you forgotten how long you have deserted your kingdom? We must go back at once, or your people will blame me for keeping you away so long"

"Nay, dearest, let us tarry one more day in this heavenly place—To-night is ours, beloved!—To-morrow we shall return"

CHAPTER V

THE HAPPY YEARS passed by swiftly since Pururavas and Urvasie returned from their long honeymoon sojourn in the mountains and woodlands of the Himalayas Time had mellowed their feeling for each other, whilst fate had accorded them a harmony and bliss such as is vouchsafed to few earthly couples Their cup of happiness seemed indeed to be full to overflowing The people, too, enjoyed an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity

There was, however, one flaw that marred the King's

cup of joy. They had no son to bless the perfect union—no child with lotus face and dancing eyes to gladden his parents' hearts. A tinge of disappointment saddened the King's life when he reflected upon it—a disappointment shared by all his people.

One morning when the King with the two Queens and attended by the Amazons of the Euterian Guard and numerous other attendants was returning after having bathed in holy waters at the confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna, a sudden hue and cry arose among the ranks of his followers.

'The Jewel! The Jewel!' cried a voice in consternation. 'The Jewel Union' has been carried off by a vulture! The cry was taken up by all the processionists and great commotion prevailed among the crowd for it was known that the King valued the gem above all his other jewellery; moreover, the Queen Urvashi was never far without it.

'Quick! My bow and arrow!' commanded the King. Ere one could bring them to him, the truant bird had soared into the sky far beyond an arrow's range. Watched by an angry and excited crowd, it circled round and round above them the fiery crimson jewel incarnadined, as it dangled from its beak.

He then sent instructions to the Chief of Police to set on the winged thief when, at eventide, he was seen to alight. Before the King's command could be obeyed, however, Lohavati entered, bearing a message from the King, and an arrow of glowing steel in her hand.

lain "But here is his arrow Perhaps it may give some clue to his identity"

"Let me see it," said the King eagerly Taking the arrow from Latavya's hand, he examined it closely

As Pururavas silently scrutinised the fine writing upon the steel, his expression changed to one of amazement and wonder For a long time he stared at the letters as though fascinated by them At last, his friend Manavaka, who was sitting beside him, interrupted his reverie

"Well what does it say?" enquired the Brahmin curiously "You look as though you'd seen a ghost!"

"Listen, Manavaka!" answered the King in a hushed tone "Listen and marvel at the archer's name 'Ayus, son of warrior Ilan and heavenly Urvasie!'"

"What!" cried Manavaka, jumping out of his seat, and waving his hands jubilantly in the air "Hail, King! Long live thy son!"

"But how is it possible?" exclaimed Pururavas in perplexity "I have never been parted from Urvasie,—except for a short time during the sacrifice in the forest,—nor seen any signs of pregnancy in her How and when did my goddess bear me a son, O wonder of wonders?—But stay I remember once for a few days her face looked pale and wan, her eyes large and languid, whilst her breasts were dark and swollen But that was all"

"You forget that she is a celestial to whom human characteristics do not apply," remarked the Brahmin

"True, but why conceal her motherhood from me?" declared Pururavas thoughtfully

"Oh, it is quite plain why," observed Manavaka, laughing "If Pururavas thinks I'm getting old,' she thought, 'he'll start cradle-snatching some sweet young thing' "

"No, jokes aside,——"

"Tis the seventh wonder of the world," agreed Manavaka soberly

Some time after, as the King and Manavaka were still puzzling over the mystery of the unknown archer, the chamberlain Latavya came in to announce that a hermi-

tess from the hermitage of sage Chyavan had arrived and sought audience with the King

"Sir said the chamberlain "The hermitess Satavatie brings a young boy with her and seeks an immediate audience with Your Majesty"

"Let them be ushered in at once" answered the King eagerly

"Very well sire" replied Latava

A few moments later the chamberlain returned, leading in the old hermitess with a noble and handsome boy by her side. The latter was dressed in barks'kin with one sturdy fair arm and shoulder bare like a young warrior and in his hand he held a bow. A strong emotion gripped the King at sight of the child with his proud carriage and reval upright bearing. He felt instinctively drawn towards him.

"Wh" declared Manavaka voicing the King's own thoughts "This noble boy must be the very archer whose arrow shot the bird—How closely his features resemble yours!"

"I think it must be so" answered the King in a low voice "for I feel a strange yearning towards him and long to hold him in my arms"

"O path-born one!" said the hermitess bowing before the King "Pleasures attend upon thee!—My child" she called fondly to the boy "Behold thy father, the King. Put down before him"

The child thus confirmed by the old hermitess, joyfully clung the boy in his arms.

Manavaka continued fondly overcome with pride

order that he might be perfectly fit for kingship That day, however, the boy had violated the rules of the hermitage, by levelling his arrow against a bird, whereupon the sage had asked her to take the youthful prince and give him back unto his mother's keeping

When Urvasie was summoned by the King, she was surprised to see a strange child sitting at her lord's feet, whose curly locks the latter wound around his fingers

"Who is this child," she thought wonderingly, "whom the King receives so intimately, and whose hair he fondles so tenderly?"

Then her eyes lighted upon the aged Satyavatie With a little cry, she held out her arms to the boy

"My son! — My Avus!" she cried

"Child, go to thy mother," prompted the hermitess

Wide-eyed, the child gazed at his wondrously beautiful mother in silence for a few seconds, then threw his arms around her impulsively Urvasie embraced the boy fondly, kissing him with all the pent-up emotion of her long-denied motherhood

"Lo, daughter, thine son, grown to boyhood," said Satyavatie "He has been well versed in all lore and learning, and every heroic act"

"Oh, mother, I touch thy feet in eternal gratitude! How shall I ever repay thy debt?" asked Urvasie tearfully

"Nay, talk not of repayment," answered Satyavatie "Twas an honour and a joy to bring up so noble a child. — Now I must depart hence, for many religious duties await me at the hermitage, and it grows dark"

"Oh, mother, must you go so soon?" pleaded Urvasie "Stay awhile, for I have so much to ask you about my son"

"I fear I cannot delay any longer," replied the hermitess

"I bow to thee, mother," said the King gratefully, "and to the sage who hath brought up my son to such noble youth"

"Peace be with you, good king and you my daughter said Satyawati, as she made ready to leave "Avis child be a good son to thy noble parents Farewell now"

"Oh mother, you are not going to leave me?" asked the boy in alarm

"Child thou art with thy parents now," observed Satyawati "What use hast thou for an old woman like me Thou wilt soon forget me in the joys of the new home"

"No no mother, I shall never forget you!" declared the boy tearfully clinging to the hermitess "Promise me you will come to see me often?"

"Yes yes child I shall come as often as my duties permit," answered Satyawati wiping a tear from her own eye "Now go to thy parents, and let me depart in peace"

"But my peacock—who will look after him now?" pursued the boy "He used to sleep on my lap, and let me rest his crest Will you send him to me, mother?"

One of the hermits shall bring him to thee tomorrow promised the old woman And after many promises and farewells she finally departed

"Oh my blessed angel!" cried Pururava "Thou hast been the proud father of this glorious god-like boy the delight of all eyes and men But why didst thou leave me all the while?"

In the midst of an evening however, Urzati burst into the room of the king weeping Great sobs shook her body as though they would tear her apart "My dear son, my love!" cried the king astonished "What"

Universe, looks upon thy child's face, then thou wilt return to Heaven,' said he. Now thou knowest why I did hide him away from thee all these years. Sick with terror at the thought of parting from thee, I bore the child away secretly to Chyavan's hermitage, and entrusted him to the venerable Satyavatie's care. Now our beloved son has returned to us, and thou hast looked upon his face!—Alas! The last hour of our life together is upon us!"

"The last hour of our life together? What sayest thou?" exclaimed Pururavas, turning white.

"I fear so, my dearest lord," replied Urvasie, weeping. "Oh, how jealous are the gods of human happiness!" exclaimed Pururavas bitterly. "First the unparalleled joy of finding my son, and then—this blow! O misery!—O grief! 'tis too much."

"Oh, do not think for a moment that I go to Heaven willingly," begged Urvasie plaintively.

"I know thou dost not, beloved. Thou must obey the command of Indra. I, too, shall leave the world and roam the jungles. Life without thee would be intolerable. The diadem of kingship I shall place upon thy son's head, and retire into the forests."

"No, no, father, do not do so, I beg you," pleaded the boy. "I am too young,—I should not know how to rule." "Child, the strength required for great tasks does not come with years,—it is inborn in one. Latavya!" called the King resolutely.

"Sire?" answered the chamberlain, appearing in the doorway.

"Ask the Council to prepare for the coronation of my son," said the King.

"Sire?" gasped the chamberlain completely taken aback by the King's order. "Is it really your will, Sire?" he asked, staring in astonishment from the King to the boy that stood by his side.

"It is, Latavya."

Just then a flash of lightning dazzled their eyes.

"Lightning in a clear blue sky?" queried the King starting

"It is the Lord Narada," said Urvashi, gazing fearfully at the heavens

"So it is," observed the King dully "Let us go up the terrace to wait for him"

"Look father!" exclaimed Ayus excitedly, as he watched the heavenly emissary swiftly descending to earth "He looks like a silver tree shooting down to earth from heaven"

A few seconds later, the celestial visitor touched lightly down upon the terrace straight as an arrow, to the great fascination of little Ayus

"Hail to thee King of the Universe!" said he, saluting the King

Greetings to thee Lord Narada," responded the King politely But in his heart he feared that the messenger had been despatched to fetch Urvashi back to Heaven

"I bow before thee Lord Narada," said Urvashi trembling and thinking the moment was imminent when she must leave the earth at last

"May you live in conjugal bliss forever!" said Narada blessing them

"Oh would that it could be so!" involuntarily exclaimed Pururava with a note of despair in his voice

The mighty Indra sends thee greetings and a message

began Lord Narada when they were all seated in their chariots "and all cars," answered Pururava expecting to

"I obey Indra's commands to the letter," joyfully declared the king

"Ah a dagger has been pulled out of my heart!" breathed Urvasie happily, a supreme, unspeakable joy illumining her radiant and lovely countenance

THE RAGHUVANSA
OR
A SAGA OF OLD IND

CHAPTER I

THIS IS THE SAGA of an old and ancient dynasty of kings of India, a noble and illustrious race of heroes, dazzling in virtue and might, who ruled their day with majesty and power

In this glorious line, there sprang a great king called Dilipa, the son of the wise and reverent Manu, who began the race, as the purest word may begin the Holy Scriptures Tall, handsome, and broad-shouldered, a warrior to the hilt, Dilipa walked the world like a Meru, adored by his people, hated and feared by his enemies

Dilipa guarded his kingdom like a wise and just father, watching over his subjects' welfare with zealous care There seemed indeed to be naught lacking in their happiness,—or his,—except one thing he had no son and heir to succeed him on the throne of his fathers The gentle Queen Sudakshina, though pure and noble in heart, was alas' blighted with the curse of barrenness that gnawed at her empty, miserable womb

At last, the king decided to offer a sacrifice to win a son With this end in view, he cast off the burdens and responsibilities of kingship for a while, and went on a pilgrimage with his chaste Queen, in search of the sage, Vasishtha, master of all saintly lore and learning

Escorted by a small retinue, and clad in simple, rustic attire, the royal pair sped through the forests in a chariot, accompanied by the peacock's call, and startling the deer into swift retreat Overhead, the cranes flew around as they travelled swiftly onward, the cool breezes lashing

against their faces like a whip. Time and again they stopped at wayside shrines to greet a priest who wished them godspeed and success or talk to simple herdsmen who vied with each other to offer them ghee, butter or rice-milk as they chatted informally to their king and queen about the ancient trees that bordered the road or the cattle that grazed in the fields.

With Lojisa's delight Dilipa pointed out to his Queen objects of beauty or curiosity in the moving landscape until at last they arrived at the hermitage of the Sage. Stopping the chariot Dilipa handed down his Queen with tender care and together they entered the grove, seeking the cottage of the Ascetic. They were received at the door by the disciples of the Sage, who ushered them into the holy man's presence.

for the night to the thatched cottage prepared for their reception by the saintly tribe where they lay themselves down to rest upon a spread of sweet-smelling grass.

With morning began the royal couple's devoted attendance on the holy cow Nandini. Graciously the Queen adorned her with flowers, sprayed her with perfumes, then led her to the edge of the forest where she handed her over to the care of her husband, herself returning to the hut to spend the day in prayer and fasting.

Throughout the day the royal herdsman patiently obeyed his charge like a faithful shadow — feeding her from a silver bowl if she grew warm, tenderly patting her twice or three times if she seemed restless, or carefully marking her straying footsteps, but never closely guiding her wherever she chose to roam. At last when dusk fell the cow turned her steps homeward, and followed by the King. Majestically she walked on till she came to the border of the wood, where they met by the Queen, who offered Nandini a plate of curries which she ate gratefully. Together the King and Queen followed her home, attending to her until she lay down, when they placed lanterns and fresh grass and a bed of turf, then themselves laid their heads to rest.

hands powerless to move. Furious with himself for being unable to strike, with the foe so near at hand, Dillipa once more tried to discharge an arrow, but in vain. His limbs were paralysed, as though by magic.

"Cease your futile attempts, great king," said a human voice contemptuously. "You will shoot your arrows in vain. You cannot harm me, for I am Kumbhodara, the friend of Nikumbha. And I serve him well, for he always mounts his bull by climbing upon my back. It is he who has stationed me here in lion's disguise to scare away all beasts that venture too near to this tree which is his favourite—This cow comes doomed to die! But no shame accrues to you, for you are powerless to move or resist."

For a while, Dillipa was stunned into inaction. Even his mind refused to function. Soon, however, his spirit rebelled against the tyranny of fate. Boldly he addressed the lion.

"O mighty Lion," he said, "I know you will laugh at me, since I cannot act. But I cannot in cold blood stand here and see my master's beloved cow slaughtered so cruelly before my very eyes. Instead, I offer you my body for your food—Take it,—and let the cow go!"

But the lion only smiled at the king's impetuosity.

"You have youth, beauty, wealth, and power," said he. "Would you throw them all away in haste for the sake of a cow?—Think. Your people in their thousands and tens of thousands depend upon you. Would you, for the life of one cow, betray them all?—Do not be afraid of your master. You can make up for the loss of one cow by the gift of hundreds. Be wise, great king, and save yourself."

"Nay," declared the King firmly. "No warrior is worthy of his name who does not protect the weak. 'Tis an old axiom that a king who betrays his trust, forfeits his royalty and his kingdom. No hundreds would make up to my master for the loss of this holy cow, which you would not have dared to attack, except by the power of

CHAPTER II

ONE FINE MORNING, in due course, the Queen's attendants brought Dilipa the joyful news that a son had been born to the Queen. Hastening to her apartments, the King gazed long and lovingly upon the babe, feasting his eyes upon the small, cherubic face, fair as a lotus flower.

"My lord," whispered Sudakshina, looking inexpressibly happy, though pale. "What is it you desire to name the child?"

"He shall be called——Raghu" pronounced the proud father. And so the new-born Prince was christened "Raghu" which means "swiftly-moving."

Throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom the people rejoiced, drums were sounded, whilst the tapping of twinkling dancing feet echoed through the marble palace-halls and in the festive streets. As the Prince grew in health and beauty and nobility of character, his parents' hearts swelled with pride, their love for each other burning with greater intensity as it centred upon their only child.

The handsome lad soon learned the principles of religion and knowledge, his brilliant mind a fertile soil for lore and learning. From his father, he studied the skilful use of bow and arrow, donning the deerskin, for not only was Dilipa a great king,—he also excelled in archery. As the young Prince grew to manhood's estate graciously and with dignity, his doting father wedded him to lovely and worthy brides, conferring on him the title of Associate-King, to bear half the burden of kingship, which he did with becoming, though majestic modesty.

One day, the young Prince, together with other princely comrades, was engaged in guarding the sacred white horse that had been set at liberty to roam at will, for the great *aswamedha*, or Horse-sacrifice, which his father

But the hot-headed Raghu refused to yield an inch before Indra's formidable might. Fearlessly he challenged him to battle.

"Over my dead body shalt thou take my father's horse!" he cried, incensed with rage. "Take thy weapon, King of Gods, since thou seekest to fight."

So saying, the brave Prince strung his bow, and sped an arrow heavenwards, which hit the mark, piercing the great god. Losing patience at this affront, Indra sent a dart with unerring aim that avidly sucked the Prince's blood. Next an arrow from the Prince's side struck the hand of Indra, whilst another tore his lightning-flag into pieces.

The enraged god thereupon waxed mighty fierce, and a terrible battle ensued. Arrows went up and down the heavens like winged creatures, but the Prince held on,—brave, fiery, and tenacious. Nor could great Indra cool his ardour, though he sent his shafts in lightning succession. At last the gallant Prince cut Indra's bowstring with a half-moon of steel, at which the wrathful god seized the bolt of fire with which he was wont to clip the wings of mountains, and threw it at the Prince with deadly aim.

Raghu fell to the ground, sorely wounded, to the sorrow of his comrades, who rallied round him on all sides. With a superhuman effort, however, he soon rose to his feet again,—undaunted and undefeated, amidst the loud cheers of his friends.

Then his mighty foe, lost in admiration at his young adversary's astonishing courage and endurance in the face of such a fierce onslaught, addressed himself to him thus:

"Brave Prince," said he, "thou alone of all mortal men hast held out against my fiery bolt, which mountains cannot resist. Pleased with thy great valour, I grant thee whatsoever thou wilt,—except the victim horse."

"Mighty King of Gods," replied the Prince, putting his sword back into its sheath again. "Since thou wilt not

give back the horse grant that my god-fearing father may nevertheless receive the Heaven which would have been his had he been allowed to complete the long and painful sacrifices of the *asvamedha* in peace.

Indra thereupon granted the gallant Prince his request before he soared into his Heaven again.

King Dusha was overjoyed to see his son alive and none the worse for his adventure though he was somewhat maimed by the lightning. Soon the aged King laid the whole burden of kingship upon the young Prince's broad shoulders himself retiring to the forests with his Queen to end his days upon earth in peace and as the sage

fortifying his capital, he set out with his armies, amidst the cheers and acclamations of the people, as housewives showered rice upon him and his hosts for good luck

The air resounded with the clash of armoured steel, the trumpeting of elephants, the clangour of chariots as they sped through the air raising clouds of dust to the accompaniment of the shrill neighing of the war-horses. Flags waved high above the ground, as with flushed cheeks and flashing eyes, Raghu led his brave armies across the plains,—fording rivers, clearing forests, climbing mountains

On and on they rolled, like the stormy billows of the ocean,—shouting, laughing, singing, on conquest bound, sweeping all before them, with one heart and one purpose,—Victory. Wherever they passed,—that gallant band—they uprooted kingdoms, deposed kings, or brought them in vassalage. Sweeping eastward, one by one they conquered the eastern states, travelling to the palm-shaded shores of the blue Bay of Bengal. Kingdoms that submitted gracefully were dealt with mercy, whilst those that showed defiance were ground in the dust with fierce fury, until, submitting at last, they bowed before Raghu like rice-stalks in the wind

Invincible, indestructible, all-conquering, the sun-like Raghu marched relentlessly onwards, over mountain ranges, through dense forests, and across river banks, his mail-clad armies following on swiftly-moving steeds. Turning his face northward, Raghu crossed the desert against the Persians, his inveterate foes, hardly able to resist the lotus-faced beauties who wooed him with soft love and tender looks. After the toils of the bloody wars, his armies caroused in shady vine-groves, their war-scars forgotten for the moment in the enchantment of the rose and the pomegranate, the liquor and the lovely maidens

Once again they returned to war upon the Sindhu's banks, then scaled the Himalayan summits with their tall and fragrant pines,—their phosphorescent plants

that lighted them by night Upon the slopes of great Himalaya Raghu's men fought the *Paharis*, fixing his standard on the snowy heights

Descending to the plains, the warrior-king returned home at last—victorious resplendent covered with glory and splendour, supreme lord of earthly kings, whom he restored to their thrones as his vassals, or took captive with him to his capital

On his return to Ayodhya, great Raghu celebrated a gorgeous sacrifice,—the mighty sacrifice which as Supreme Ruler of the Universe he alone of all earth's monarchs had the right to offer, the sacrifice which enjoined on the ruler the bestowal of all his wealth in alms Nor did Raghu take any taxes from his defeated foes, but sent the captive kings who had graced his triumphal return home, back to their deserted queens

Some time after Raghu had performed the grand Imperial Sacrifice, there came to him an eminent Brahmin, named Kautsa, to ask of the King the fee required by his Teacher and Preceptor, Varatantu, who had taught him the Sacred Scriptures

"Greetings to thee, good Brahmin," said Raghu, receiving him graciously "And how fares thy great Master, the Chief among the Saints of our day?"

"He is well, Your Majesty," replied the Brahmin But seeing that the King had bestowed all his wealth in alms, according to the laws of the sacrificial rite he had performed, he refrained from disclosing to him the real purpose of his visit

"Tell me, Kautsa, in what way I can serve you?" asked the King, realising that the Brahmin was holding something back For some time, Kautsa beat about the bush, not knowing what to say But on being pressed by Raghu, he blurted out his need at last

"Great King," he began hesitantly "My need is such that you can scarce supply it, even though you be thrice willing to do so—I fear I have come at the wrong time, and must, therefore, return without help"

"But, my dear friend," insisted the King "You have not yet told me what is your need!"

"It is this " replied the Brahmin "I had come to ask my Teacher's fee—But it matters not I'll seek it elsewhere Your riches, sire, are already well bestowed "

"What is the fee you owe your Teacher?" asked the King

"Well," answered Kautsa, with a sigh "It is very great indeed When I completed my studies, I asked the Saint how I should repay his great debt He declared, my faithful loyalty and love were his only fee But when I insisted too much, I fear I exasperated him For he answered impatiently, and without consideration of my poverty 'The sciences I have taught thee can scarcely be obtained for fourteen millions' he cried 'Bring me that sum'—But I dare not ask you for the boundless reward he claims "

The King was touched to the quick at his inability to grant the Brahmin's request

"It would seem strange," he replied proudly, "if Raghu were to turn away a holy man who seeks his Master's fee, to find it from another Lord—Stay on awhile as my guest, until I find you the money you need "

"Sire," answered the Brahmin gratefully "You overwhelm me I do not know how to thank you!"

"It is the duty and pleasure of princes to serve their people," replied Raghu

Immediately, the King made preparations to set out to obtain the priceless sum from Kuvera, the Lord of Wealth, by the use of force, if necessary Planning to start on his mission at the crack of dawn, Raghu retired to rest for the night, his store of arms and weapons kept in readiness for the morning's adventure

But at dawn they brought him word, that while he slept, there fell from Heaven a shower of gold that filled all the palace courtyard to overflowing Kuvera had rained down the riches in fear of Raghu's might

"Tell the Brahmin," said the King, sending for Kautsa,

"that Raghu has found him the boon he craved "

When Kautsa saw the store of gold, he was agape with astonishment

' Why — why, — where did it come from, sire? " he gasped
The King smiled

"It is yours," he said simply

"But this is much more than I asked for," protested the Brahmin

"Nevertheless take it," insisted the King

At last Kautsa consented to take the whole golden treasure, borne on camels' backs

"For thee, noble King, even Heaven pours forth her favours for the asking," said Kautsa thanking the King

"Thou art indeed possessed of all things save one. Receive a son as brilliant, as virtuous, and as noble as thyself!"

CHAPTER IV

AND so it came to pass, not long after, the Queen gave birth to a son, a beautiful child whom his father called Aja, the Unborn One, after the Supreme Soul.

His father's pride and joy, Aja was brave and gentle, and grew up into a tall and exceedingly handsome Prince, whom all the maidens and their mothers loved to gaze upon. When he was grown to noble youth, and had acquired all wisdom and learning and skilful knowledge of the use of arms, his father sent him to Vidarbha, where King Bhoja of Krathakalsakas was holding the *swayamvara* of his beautiful sister, Indumati.

Anxious that his son should win such a peerless Princess for a bride, Raghu despatched him, escorted by a vast army, as became his high estate, to join the throng of princes and kings who had been invited to attend the memorable ceremony.

Breaking journey to Vidarbha on the fertile banks of the Narbada river, Aja was resting with his hosts, when

a great elephant reared his head above the river waters, rose from among the waves, and trumpeting loudly, burst furiously through the torrents on to the river-bank. There was a wild stampede among the beasts of Aja's camp, who started in headlong flight before the elephant, causing complete chaos and confusion among his soldiers.

Aja alone held his presence of mind. Drawing slightly at his bow-string in order not to mortally wound the beast,—it being forbidden by the law—he loosed a shaft which struck the great tusker between the eyes. Before the amazed eyes of the whole company, the elephant immediately shed his animal exterior, and assumed the guise of a young god, clad in resplendent robes of shimmering silk.

"Fair prince," said he, introducing himself to Aja. "I am Priyamvada, the son of Indra, who was cursed by Matanga in days gone by, and doomed to remain in elephant's shape until thou, sprung from the illustrious dynasty of Ikshvaku, shouldst split my brow—I have long yearned for thee, dear friend, and now that thou hast freed me from this accursed spell, pray accept this magic arrow named 'Sleep-compellor', which will bring thee sure triumph and victory over thy enemies, as a small token of my gratitude."

The two clasped their hands in firm friendship as Aja courteously accepted the gift from the hands of the young god. Soon after, they parted company, one going to Vidarbha to seek a beautiful bride, the other turning his face towards the groves of Chaitraratha.

At long last, after a journey of many days, Aja arrived at the gates of Bhoja's capital, where he was right royally received by the king and his subjects, who conducted him to a beautiful mansion prepared for his reception. The Prince retired to his chamber for the night, but there was to be no sleep for the excited Aja, who lay awake thinking of the lovely maiden whom the kings and princes of the world had come to woo from far and near. It was daybreak when sleep came to Aja at last,

filled with fitful dreams of an enchanting princess

But the songs of the minstrels awoke him then, calling to him to greet the auspicious day

"Awake, sweet Prince! Open thine eyes,

'The moon sinks low,—the stars are vanishing fast

'Thy flower-wreaths languish,—the lamps burn dim,

"For the veil of night has lifted at last"

So sang the minstrels, arousing the Prince with their soft, lyrical strains Then Aja, arrayed in all his princely finery, joined the host of kings and princes and chiefs who had gathered together in the lofty hall of the palace to grace the beauteous Indumati's *swayamvara*

Seated around the hall on high thrones, the rulers and princes and chiefs who came to woo the princess, appeared like so many gods in all their jewelled glory, as they waited anxiously for the maiden to enter There was a slight stir among the suitor-kings as Aja entered tall and fair and resplendent in his youthful beauty, with his upright carriage and dignified bearing All looked at him with dismay, for as the stars pale before the moon, so did the suitor-kings feel robbed of their brightness and luminosity before the god-like Aja Nor did they harbour hopes of winning the fair Indumati any more

Mounting the carved steps to the throne prepared for him, Aja sat down upon the golden seat amid the hostile stares of his rivals The aroma of burning aloes filled the air with its pungent sweetness, whilst gay and auspicious music floated up to the hall from the courtyard below

At last, radiant and glowing and beautiful in her gorgeous wedding robes came the Princess, borne upon a palanquin of gold studded with precious stones, to choose herself a Lord from among the majestic host present That peerless beauty, Creation's masterpiece of art and craftsmanship, Indumati,—the day-dream and heart's desire of countless kingly hearts, was the cynosure of hundreds of admiring glances, with her magnetic personality, such is the power that great and perfect beauty

exercises over the minds of men

As the Princess entered, the different suitors reacted in various ways to their feelings of tension and nervousness. Some played with their garlands, others traced imaginary lines with their feet, still others straightened their coronets, tossed dice into the air, or pretended to engage each other in earnest conversation. But all the while their eyes were glued upon the fascinating vision in white and gold, whose sparkling beauty held them all in complete thrall.

With the help of her maidens, the Princess stepped down from the palanquin, watched by a hundred hypnotised eyes. Then led by her guide and lady-in-waiting, a gentle-woman of noble rank named Sunanda, she passed slowly along the line of kings and princes and chieftains, silent and impassive, listening as her companion eloquently extolled the talents and virtues and greatness of each of them.

First Sunanda led the Princess to the mighty Lord of Magadha.

"Devout and pious, he rules in Magadha, this mighty Prince," proclaimed Sunanda in a clear voice. "His thoughts are noble, and his arm strong to save the weak and helpless—Wilt thou give thy hand to him, sweet Princess?" After praising him, Sunanda paused. But the Princess bowed ever so slightly,—a small, cold little bow of silent rejection.

Then Sunanda led the maiden to Anja's Lord.

"Here stands Anja's Lord," she declared, "whom heavenly damsels have sought to woo, so youthful and winsome is he. Fair of speech and noble in action, he is a being apart. Thou wouldst be a fortunate Queen if thou didst choose him for thy lord."

But "Move on!" said the maiden, averting her eyes from Anja's King, though she knew him to be a fine and worthy prince.

"Here stands Avanti's Lord," said the Lady Sunanda, leading her Princess before another noble King. "Lean

and strong and noble is he Dwelling in great Kala, all through the year he and his queens enjoy beautiful nights O beauteous Maid, wouldst thou like to wander through shady groves in the company of this fine King?"

But once more the mysterious maiden passed on like a silent, graceful swan, her pure and tender heart yet unfixed on any

Next Sunanda led Indumati, Brahma's fairest child before Anupa's Lord

"Sprung from the great Kartavirya, King and Saint of yore, who brought even the mighty Lord of Lanka upon his knees, is Pratapa, the friend of all saints and sages Wilt thou be this brave man's wife?"

But still Indumati remained aloof and inscrutable, her fancy free to roam at will

Then they came to Sushena, Lord of Surasena

"Look upon this king," observed Sunanda "He is brave and handsome and blazing in battle, the possessor of gems without equal. Wilt thou marry him, maiden, and bathe in the waters of the Jumna, or wander at will in Brindaban gardens, or gaze with joy upon the gay peacocks of Govardhan, dancing madly among the rocks?"

Once more the Princess passed on with majestic demeanour and averted glance, her heart untouched, and yet another face lit up with hope a moment earlier by her dazzling glance, fell with disappointment stark and keen sinking into deepest gloom

Next the fair Princess listened with a half-smile on her face, as Sunanda praised Kalinga's King

"See this warrior-king, he is Lord of Ocean too An archer without equal he is long-armed and brave Be his bride, and thou wilt walk upon the palm-grove-laden shores of Ocean, where cool breezes will kiss and caress thy satin skin "

Another's destined bride, the Princess passed on relentlessly

Next they turned to Nagpur's King

"See this great King," cried Sunanda, "whom Agastya he great himself vouchsafed to greet, and Lanka's king would fain have befriended, since he had won the Bow of Shiva Give him thy hand, and enjoy the sunny southern land He is dark,—thou art dazzlingly fair,—let his darkness be a foil to thy fair beauty "

But the maiden was unmoved, and paid no heed to the words Like the lotus blossom that waits for the sun to rise in the heavens, and will not open its petals to the moon's white rays, her heart remained closed and shut to all.

Onward, at last, she came to Prince Aja, poised like a lily upon its fragile stalk. The Prince's heart missed a beat as he gazed at her with all his soul, wondering, "Shall I find favour,—or fail, like the rest?" His right arm throbbed uncontrollably as the bright Princess came and stood before him, and returned his look with a smile At last her heart was given,—irresistibly drawn from her breast like a magnet, as in that deep, long glance she yielded him up all her pure, steadfast, and eternal love

The shrewd, worldly-wise lady-in-waiting perceived at once that her beautiful, moon-like Princess had given her heart at last, and thus she took up her tale

"Sprung from high Ikshvaku's line, this royal Prince rules in North Kosala Risen from a King of kings, his proud and mighty race shone with greater splendour when kingly Dilipa ruled, then unconquerable Raghu, who won an Empire by his prowess in battle, but gave away his wealth in alms, as becomes the mightiest of monarchs His fame has reached high heaven itself

"Now this bright Prince bears half the burden of that mighty Empire which his sire once bore alone Choose him for thy lord, sweet maid, for in youth beauty, nobility, lineage, he alone is thy equal, and modest withal "

When Sunanda ceased to speak, the Princess shed her shyness and reserve, and by her ardent glance proclaimed her love for the Prince Yet modesty prevented her cast-

ing around his neck the wreath that sealed her choice, until Sunanda, noting her maidenly confusion, recalled her to herself by pretending to lead her away, saying

"Come, gracious lady, let us pass on to the others!"

The maiden gave her an indignant glance, and at once threw the wreath around the blushing Prince's neck. Clasped by that garland woven with the loveliest roses and lilies and jasmines of the land, Aja felt the rapture of first love sweep over him with an intoxicating sweetness. Hot and confused and dizzy with happiness, the Prince heard the acclamations of the people, as, with one accord, they hailed the perfect match—the union of two lovely souls in perfect beauty clothed

CHAPTER V

KING BHOJA THEN led the happy train to wed his sister to her chosen lord, whilst with chagrined looks and ruffled feelings, the rival suitor-kings, spurned by Indumatī, went back to their camps, harbouring thoughts of revenge and hatred in their hearts.

With her handsome Prince Charming by her side, the fair Princess walked over flowers strewn in her path by the loyal citizens, who rejoined greatly with the young lovers, hailing the gladsome sight, for they appeared like Love and Springtime wedded together.

"Long live Prince Aja and Princess Indumatī!" the cries resounded through the city as the procession passed towards the king's palace, where the Priest waited to marry them. Women thronged the latticed balconies to catch a glimpse of their beauteous Princess and her god-like bride-groom-elect, throwing auspicious rice and flowers upon the heavenly couple.

Together, the celestial pair arrived at last at the royal palace. There, before the sacred fire, Indumatī's fair hand clasped tightly in Aja's firm strong grasp, the

Priest joined them together in holy wedlock Hand-in-hand, the newly-wedded pair walked around the sacred fire, then the bride, radiant with happiness and joy that amid a host of kings, she had found the soul that matched her own, threw upon the fire her offering of rice Fed by cassia, oil, and grain, the holy flame rose higher and higher to bless the wedded pair, who glowed with a great happiness, their joined hands sharing the fire of pure and tender passion

After the sacred ceremony was over, the princely pair were seated on golden thrones, where the king, most noble of hosts, the members of his family, and the royal guests threw auspicious rice on them

When the marriage celebrations were completed, King Bhoja sent to each disappointed suitor-king a host of lavish gifts, which they made a show of accepting with graciousness, though inwardly their hearts were darkened by treacherous thoughts For they plotted together to lie in wait for the Prince and Princess on the high road, and seize the bride

Meanwhile King Bhoja gave his beloved sister a rich dowry before he speeded the young couple homewards towards Ayodhya, accompanied by a mighty convoy, himself camping with them for three days without the city Hardly had King Bhoja parted company with Aja and his bride, when the banded kings barred their way, to smite the Prince who had taken from them the Pearl among maidens, Indumati

At once the Prince placed his precious bride in the safe keeping of a tried and faithful warrior, and threw himself impetuously on the banded host, boldly challenging them to fight A fierce struggle ensued, in which chariot with chariot, horse with horse, elephant with elephant, warrior with warrior, met in deadly strife The dust raised by the battle was so thick that the sun itself was obscured, and friend from foe could not be distinguished, except when men shouted out the names of their leaders

Horses, elephants, and men lay in a gore of blood that streamed the earth like so many rivers, whilst archers' deadly barbs darted swiftly back and forth through the dense atmosphere, rent with the walls of the dying, mingling with the battle-cries of the live. The dreadful battle-field appeared like a veritable Feast of Death with dead men's heads, fallen helmets, and blood, blood,—crimson-red blood—everywhere!

The fortunes of war rested now with one side, now with the other, till at length Prince Aja, still as fresh and untired as at the outset of hostilities, used against his foes the magic, sleep-producing weapon presented to him by Priyamvada. At once the whole host of kings was hypnotised into deep slumber, becoming as impotent as morons. In the sudden stillness that followed, Aja raised the conch-shell to his lips and blew upon it, to call his warriors together.

Then upon his enemies' banners he wrote in blood

"Raghu's son has robbed you of your honour, but he spares your lives out of mercy!"

At last he approached his trembling bride, who wept with joy and relief to see him alive.

"Look, Beloved," he said tenderly. "Behold our foes as helpless as children. Could such mice as these take thee from me?"

At these words, Indumati's lovely face brightened. She loved her peerless Prince yet more for having so gallantly fought for her, and wordlessly clung to him, as he bore her triumphantly home to Ayodhya.

When Prince Aja returned home with his peerless and hard-won bride, Raghu welcomed them joyfully knowing what had transpired on the way. He then bequeathed his kingdom upon Aja, himself turning to tread the way of peace in the forests, as was the wont of monarchs of the solar race, when their sons had come of age. But Aja begged his father not to leave him. Whereupon Raghu retired to dwell in a retreat near the city, instead of journeying in the forests.

The people hailed their young monarch as a second Ragnu, and he in turn watched over their weal with care and justice and wise counsel. He treated none with scorn, was neither harsh nor lenient, but always followed the golden mean of kingly conduct.

Whilst Aja sought to subjugate all earthly kings, his father fixed his thoughts on the divine, subduing all earthly desires and bonds, until his soul went forth to join the Soul Supreme, being deeply mourned by his son.

Soon after his father's death, the lovely Indumati brought forth a son, named Dasaratha, who was destined to be the sire of the divine hero, Rama, the slayer of ten-headed Ravana.

For a time, Aja and Indumati, that divinely matched couple, tasted the sweetness and joy of a perfect union, —the marriage of minds and souls in tune with one another, while the birth of their son Dasaratha had added a fullness to their already rich lives. Aja used his might to free the oppressed, his sacred lore to serve the saints, and his wealth to improve his subjects' welfare. And was thrice blessed. There seemed indeed to be naught lacking in his full and rounded life. But sorrow alas! lay hid in ambush for the happy Aja.

CHAPTER VI

ON A SAD, fateful day, as Aja and his beloved Indumati walked arm-in-arm through the lovely gardens that lay on the outskirts of the city, there fell from Heaven upon Indumati's soft breast a wreath of celestial flowers, which the rushing wind dropped from the harp of the divine minstrel Narada, who was passing that way at the moment.

A mere touch of that woeful wreath, and alas! the radiant Indumati became pale as death, and tottering, fell lifeless at her husband's feet. She fell,—and he

fell after her

They found him unconscious,—their beloved King,—and recalled him to life, but their lovely Queen, alas! was beyond earthly recall. The spark of life had left her sweet body, so all help or attendance was in vain. Like a harp that needs tuning, the stricken Aja raised her upon his lap,—his beautiful Indumati,—peerless of queens, matchless of maidens. Unbelievingly he gazed upon her ashen face. Like the grey moon at pale dawn it appeared in death, cold and unearthly.

Passionately he lamented her, his firm, strong mind broken by the sudden, tragic loss. Piteously he bemoaned his fate.

"Can the soft touch of flowers take a life? Then what missile may not be fatal, when Destiny wishes to destroy?—Or perhaps Death chooses a soft dart to take a soft life, even as the softest snow can wither the most delicate blossom? Mayhap Death meant his cruel shaft for me? Oh unhappy Fate, that struck the gentle ivy, while the oak remains!"

"Beloved!" wept Aja. "Why hast thou so suddenly forsaken me, whose heart was forever thine? How have I wronged thee, sweet, that thou hast left me thus without warning,—alone, desolate, widowed?—Didst thou doubt my love, O dearly-beloved? But my heart beat for thee alone, O heavenly one! I would fain die with thee!—my stricken soul didst follow thine, but alas! returned alone. Oh, how swiftly didst thy soul fly to Heaven!—Art thou dead?—I can scarce believe it! Look how the wind ripples thy fair hair, and rustles through thy garments. Perhaps the breath of life will soon stir thy dear body, and bring thee back to succour my soul—and our child's. Oh, awake, dear love, and disperse my sorrow. Return to me again, O my beloved, for I cannot live without thee."

"O dear face that was a few minutes ago so eloquent, so joyous, so radiant,—I weep to see it so mute and still silent!"

"O lovely one," wailed the stricken king, "whose delicate limbs could scarcely rest upon a bed of softest flowers and leaves, how canst thou stand the brutal violence of the burning funeral-pyre? Alas! all nature mourns thee, Beloved! The air is still with sorrow The *asoka*, that thou didst tend with thine own loving hands, cries for thee, shedding its blossoms, like floods of tears —O bitter, bitter irony of fate, that mine should be the hands to make garlands out of them for thy funeral, O my love!

"All joy has fled from the earth,—my bed now will lie cold, dark, desolate!—Thou alone possessed my heart, O my dove, but thou leavest me, alone and deserted! Soul of my soul, friend, sweetheart, wife, queen, — cruel Death hath deprived me of all! My life is now barren,—which was filled to overflowing with thy love, O thou gazelle-eyed one!"

Bereaved Aja thus mourned for his lost love, and would not be comforted

At last from his lap the people removed the dead Queen, and reverently laid her upon a pyre of sandal-wood mixed with aloes, dressed in white silken robes, as befitted a Queen, and garlanded with white flowers Heart-broken Aja would fain have mounted the pyre that consumed his beautiful Queen But for his subjects' sake he lived on, though sorrow was now to be his constant companion

For ten days he haunted that grove, given over to grief, then in that garden left his dearest forever Dejected and gloomy, he entered his capital city, where his subjects received him silently, the tears coursing down their furrowed cheeks, like floods overflowing the gates of their pitying hearts

There came to Aja then a disciple from his Teacher and Preceptor, with words of comfort to console and calm him

"O plous King," said the disciple "'Tis a heavy and grievous blow has befallen thee, alas! The Saint sends

me to speak thee words of comfort and peace 'Tis true words avail little in the face of such grief and sorrow whose pangs can only be dulled or blunted by the passage of time—But brace thyself, O King, for thy people's sake

"The Saint, whose supernatural powers enable him to pierce the veil of truth beyond this life, bids me tell thee, that in days gone by, Trinabindu, the famous recluse, had, by his religious toils and penances, made Indra feel insecure in his position. The god thereupon sent down to earth a celestial nymph named Harini, to lure Trinabindu away from his austerities. When the Saint saw her, he cursed her for her wanton beauty bidding her be exiled on earth. Upon her humbly pleading for mercy, however, he relented a little. 'When thou shalt see the flowers of Heaven again thy exile on earth shall end!' said he. 'Twas this nymph that was born in Bhoja's house as Princess Indumatī, whom thou didst win for bride. Destiny beckoned her to Heaven with those celestial flowers that fell upon her breast—she could not help but go!

"Oh, mourn her not too much, good King. Before Fate's decree, all men must bow, even kings. And the tears of loved ones disturb the departed souls. This transient life is but bondage to the immortal soul, which is liberated by Death. The wise should not grieve when the soul shakes off the earthly shackles that bind it in life."

Aja bowed silently before the Saint's message, but the words of counsel fell on unheeding ears. His stricken spirit endured life's toll for eight long years, till his son was grown to manhood. Then renouncing food and drink, he went to the holy place at the confluence of the Ganga and the Sarayu, where he shed his earthly body to join his fair love again in the heavenly groves of Nandana.

CHAPTER VII

DASAPATHA THE SON of Aia and Indumati, was hailed by his subjects as a worthy successor to his great father. For he who was descended from Manu's noble race worked untiringly for his folk.

Straight as an arrow, upright of character, self-controlled, and scorning idle pleasures, Dasaratha rivalled Yama, Varuna, and Kuvera in his qualities. Mighty archer that he was, he circled the earth in his car, conquering all who came in his way. Kings bowed before him by the hundreds, as he poured forth his rain of arrows, breaking up their hostile ranks. Conquering hero of the world, he returned to Ayodhya at last, proclaiming his triumph, wielding supreme power. And no rival dared question his greatness, for his glory blazed like the noon-day sun. But he had not yet reached the peak of his ambitions.

Upon the banks of the Sarayu river he offered a great horse-sacrifice,—the sacrifice for universal dominion,—expending all the wealth he had won in his conquest of the world. Clothed in deerskin, with staff and horn in hand, he appeared like a very incarnation of Śiva.

Fighting side by side with Indra, he put to rout the evil demons who troubled saintly rites; his magic archery winning the admiration of celestial maidens, who sang his praises aloud in the heavens. When Dasaratha had raised his famous dynasty to greater brilliance, lustre, and magnificence, he wedded three lovely princesses,—of Magadha, Kosala, and Kekaya,—with whom he dwelt in perfect happiness, except that no son was born to him.

One day, when the King was out hunting in the forest, his staid affairs of state forgotten in the thrill of the chase, he heard a gurgling sound as of an elephant quenching his thirst. Forgetful of the sacred law for-