

**Nala and Damayanti (from the Mahabharata)**



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Several thousand years ago, there lived in the state of Nishada in the Land of Ind a young prince by the name of Nala, the son of Veerasena, who was so rich in every virtue that no one on earth could be compared to him: in courage, wisdom, goodness and nobleness of mind, as in physical beauty, strength, and dexterity. He resembled a Prince of the Gods, and the glory of his name shone far out into every land. At the same time, there also lived a king's daughter in the neighbouring realm of Vidarbha, who was called Damayanti, a celestial apparition whose charm and grace and loveliness, whose purity of heart and goodness of soul, had no equal. Far and wide were her praises sung, as were those of the Indian Prince Nala. Neither among gods nor among men had such a prodigy of beauty ever been seen, and so it came about that the praise of the one penetrated to the other's ear, and by this means they were not strangers but bore each other in their thoughts, loving and mutually yearning for one another without having seen their beloved by bodily sight. Then it happened one day that Nala, having removed himself from all society, was wandering dreamily in a forest near to his father's palace when a flight of white swans, whose wings shimmered all over with gold, passed by very close to him. Nala instantly seized one of these wondrous birds, and behold, the winged fowl began to speak, saying the following words to the astonished King's son:

“Do not kill me, O King, and I shall do you true service in return, I shall praise you to the Princess Damayanti in such wise that she will never think of another King's son again, but of you alone.” And now the golden plumaged swan began to tell of Damayanti, depicting her charm in such a way that Nala's heart felt itself drawn ever closer to her, and the wish was

kindled in his breast that he might be spoken of in the same manner to Damayanti.

And then the Prince let the swan fly freely away, who forthwith soared up with all his companions and flew towards the land and the city of Vidarbha.

There sat Damayanti in the garden in the midst of her hundred play-maidens, like a chaste sea-rose in the glow of its leaves, when the same flight of golden-plumaged swans came gliding over their heads. All the maidens sprang up to catch them and spread out all over the garden. Damayanti, abandoned by her friends, hurried after one of these swans, who readily let her catch him. It was the same one who had spoken of her to Nala, and it now, in like manner, said the following to Damayanti: “Charming Damayanti, hear what I have to say of Nala, King of Nishada, whose like is found on earth no longer; for his beauty is celestial, and his life and conduct are like to the life and conduct of the Heavenly Beings. Were you Nala’s spouse, you would possess everything that is beautiful and good and magnificent on earth, as you lack nothing at this moment but only that adornment; your lot, O Pearl of Maidens, would be praised as the most blessed. Wherever we have winged our way, far and wide over the world, we have not espied a man like Nala, rich in beauty and virtue, neither among men, nor in the paradises of the gods, nor in the dwellings of the giants, all of which we have seen; and as you are the noblest pearl among all women, so is Nala the jewel and ornament of men, none of whom can compare with him for beauty and goodness. If the two of you were joined in wedlock, nothing more beautiful could be found in all of Creation, for

nothing surpasses marriage, and nothing is more splendid than that union – of the noble with the noble.” Thereupon Damayanti replied, gently blushing: “Say these words to Nala also!” and in a flash the swan flew away from her with all of his companions.

Now Damayanti had no thought in her mind that was not of Nala the Incomparable. And as she soon began to walk around pale and lost in thought and full of sorrowful yearning, her father, King Bhima, was told of his daughter’s heaviness of heart by one of her play-maidens. King Bhima thereupon decided to marry his daughter and hold a splendid feast at which she would have the choice of spouse. So he sent messengers out into every land to invite the Kings and Princes to appear before Damayanti, that she might choose one of them to be her future husband. And when the Kings and Kings’ sons heard the happy tidings, they hurriedly set out, dressed in sumptuous apparel and adorned with many kinds of wreath, and accompanied by great and flamboyant retinues, in chariots, on horseback, and on elephants.

But the news of this event resounded even to the ears of the illustrious divinities; for at that time Narada, a pious, saintly man and ascetic, passed from the earthly life into the heavenly one, where Indra, King of the Skies, holds sway, when the latter cordially bid the pious man welcome and asked what was new on earth, whereupon Narada told of Damayanti’s spousal-choice. While Narada was talking, there came walking in to Indra’s presence his three companions: Agni, who rules over fire, Varuna, who governs water, and Yuma, who possessed the earth. When these Heavenly Beings heard Narada’s tidings, they decided to likewise appear as suitors

for the hand of beautiful Damayanti, and they made themselves ready straightaway, with their horses, chariots, and hosts of troops, and journeyed towards Vidarbha, where all the rulers of the world were assembled. On their way, the gods espied Nala, who was wandering down the road in reflection and longing. The four Gods of the Elements, amazed at his beauty that was like to the Sun, at once halted their chariots and spoke to him as follows, while they lowered themselves down from the skies: "Prince of Nishada, will you do us a favour and be our messenger?" "Right willingly," Nala replied; but he then asked, with a humble gesture: "Who are you Lords, encompassed in luminosity, and why am I to be your messenger?" Indra, taking the role of spokesman, said: "Know that we are Immortals; you go to Damayanti and say to her, 'Indra, Agni, Varuna, and Yama are approaching, and choose one of these gods for yourself at your spouse-choosing feast!'" Nala folded his hands across his breast and asked: "How could you require this of me, when I wish to woo her myself? Release me from that, O mighty masters!" But the gods made answer: "You have promised us and must keep your word." Borne by invisible hands of the Spirit-World, Nala arrived in the palace at Vidarbha sooner than he had expected, and he suddenly found himself in the midst of the women, close before Damayanti, and dazzled by her beauty. She, likewise enraptured at the sight of him, asked: "Who are you, godlike apparition, how are you suddenly among us, unseen and unheard by all the sentries and guards in my father's palace, as if you had come down from the heavens?" – He made answer: "Know that I am Nala, the Prince of Nishada, I come to you as messenger from the gods to announce that they are approaching you as

bridal-suitors; they granted me the power to make my way invisibly to you.”  
– Damayanti, on hearing Nala’s words, bowed to the gods and did them reverence, then she said, with a charming smile: “Just accomplish your first resolve, for I am *yours* with everything that is mine, and the words that swan spoke to me of you fill my heart and soul. Should you spurn me, then death shall be my destiny!”

Nala said: “How could you, whom the Immortals are wooing, choose for yourself a mortal being, who is like to but the dust under their feet? Whoever acts against the will of the gods chooses death; for you, however, heavenly garlands are blooming, to you they are beckoning. Which woman,” he continued, “would spurn such a bridegroom? Give ear, O Damayanti, to my advice, as to that of a friend.” Yet Damayanti replied, “I will always revere the gods, but only *you* shall be my husband!” – Nala now said to her, who stood trembling, her hands raised and tears flowing from her eyes: “I have faithfully performed my duty as messenger, as I promised to the gods; now that I have completed it, when the time comes for me to act for my own sake, I shall do so.” –

“Very well, valiant heart!” Damayanti replied. “No censure shall fall on you! Step into the rows of suitors, and I shall choose you, as the choice is left to me, you before all the gods and princes of the firmament, as of the earth, you ornament of men!”

Nala returned to the Immortals and faithfully reported to them the result of his embassy.

Now when the day of the choice arrived, all the Princes, Kings and Overlords assembled, richly adorned with gold and precious stones. Many



a handsome countenance with golden or ebon locks, the flawless make of splendid limbs, slender and powerful figures, were to be seen; but

Damayanti's eyes sought only one, Nala, whom she found – but fivefold, for the Gods of the Elements had assumed Nala's form to misguide Damayanti. Wherever she directed her gaze, she found Nala. After a long but fruitless search for the *true* Nala, she turned in fervent prayer to the gods, and trembling, with her hands folded across her breast, she spoke thus: "As truly as I have always revered you in my thoughts, words, and works, as truly as I have vowed to you and to myself that he and none other shall be my husband, and as truly as you yourselves determined him for me, so truly should you show him to me, and yourselves in your true form, you Lords of Might, you Masters and Guardians of the World!" The gods, moved by the piety and purity of Damayanti's sentiments, assumed the marks of their divinity, and were now recognised by Damayanti, standing there without touching earthly ground, with garlands of immortality, shadowless and unblinking. But Nala stood, his garland half-withered, with dust on his garment, a man like other men, whom she now approached with shy and demure looks; and touching the hem of his robe, according to custom and tradition, she hung a wreath of utmost splendour around his shoulders. Then the assembly were seized with surprise; and all cried Hail! Long live! at the choice, praising King Nala with their blessing. He, however, happily conscious of his good fortune, swore to his bride, who had chosen him, the mortal man, out of the midst of gods, to be her faithful protector and never leave her as long as his life should last. Even the gods rejoiced, and they gifted Nala, the faithful, honest messenger, with high favours. Indra, the Lord of the Skies, bestowed on him the gift of clairvoyance, and the ability to call forth, wherever he should have need of it, a refreshing breeze. The

God of Fire conferred on Nala the power to command flames and not be consumed by them; the Ruler of Earth gave sure and firm ground for his steps, and the art of preparing flavoursome dishes; the God of Water gave him power over water; while for Damayanti, they prophesied that she would be blessed with a boy and a girl, as fair and as good as she herself. Thereupon the divinities betook themselves to their cloud-chariots and departed as they had come, as did the earthly Princes. And when the joyous and sumptuous wedding festivities were over, Nala also made his way home with his wife, where they ruled over the people of Nishada, enjoying and giving happiness, and faithfully worshipped the gods.

But the Guardians of the World encountered Kali, the Dark Spirit, on their journey home. Indra asked him whither his journey tended. "To Damayanti's spousal-choice, that I may choose her for myself," was his answer. Laughing, Indra replied: "The choice of spouse has been accomplished, we ourselves were witnesses how she selected Nala, Prince of Nishada, for her husband." – When Kali heard these words he was filled with wrath and cried: "Because she chose the mortal man from among immortals, a dreadful revenge shall be exacted on him and on her!" But the gods explained to him that they themselves had given their consent because Nala was richly adorned with inner and outer excellences, as was no other mortal on earth, and that it was outrageous to curse and wish to destroy such a man. So did the Heavenly Ones, the Pure Ones, part from Kali, the Evil Spirit, but he could not curb his fury; he resolved to take habitation in Nala's heart at the next opportunity, and he instructed Dwapara, his subordinate spirit, to enter a pair of dice, that he might be of

help to him in his dark design. From this moment on, Kali constantly remained close to Nala, invisible, biding his time to execute his plan. Yet Nala always governed irreproachably and lived in joy and happiness with his Damayanti and the two children she had given him, so the Evil Spirit could not enter him.

Then it happened one evening, seven years later,<sup>1</sup> that Nala betook himself wearily to rest without performing the ablutions demanded by the religion in India; and because his body was thereby unclean, the Unclean Spirit gained entry to his heart. Nala had a half-brother, called Pushkara, who possessed a small kingdom and lived in great harmony with his brother. The Unclean Spirit whispered into Pushkara's ears in a dream that he should go forth to win the great kingdom from his royal brother in a game of dice, and rule over it as a mighty king. And so did it come to pass that Pushkara, the half-brother, appearing before Nala one morning, challenged him to a game; and Nala, through Kali's promptings, instantly agreed. The game began in Damayanti's presence; the dice flew, and with them flew gold, garments, horses, castles, and lands, to Pushkara; for Kali's subject spirit, Dwapara, had entered the dice, and Nala lost, and lost, incessantly. However, this only spurred his passion for the game, and deafened him to the entreaties and remonstrances of his wife; even his counsellors and citizens, who approached with trusting hearts loaded with care, were not allowed in his presence. Now Damayanti saw misfortune coming over her with the swiftness of a storm, and, not losing her composure, she promptly determined to secure a place of refuge for her children while time allowed.

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<sup>1</sup> In the original it is twelve years. Bechstein seems to have taken this number from Rückert's translation.

She gave them at once into the care of Varshneya, her husband's most skilled and most loyal charioteer, with the instructions to take Nala's personal chariot with the swiftest steeds and to hurry with both her children to her father. Varshneya did as the Queen commanded without delay, and when he had executed his commission by delivering the children, the horses, and the chariot, he wandered on foot, grief in his heart at the fate of his king, whom gambling frenzy had blinded, to Rituparna, the King of Ayodhya, whose service he entered as a charioteer.

Nala's game with Pushkara lasted on and on, for many weeks and months, and everything, and everything that Nala possessed, was won from him by his opponent.

Now at last, when Nala had lost everything at play to Pushkara, the latter said with a smile: "Do you wish still to continue the game? You have nothing left to call your own, save Damayanti; very well, then let us roll the dice for her!" But when Nala heard his brother speaking so, he returned to his senses, and with a pained expression on his face and a heart filled with grief, he divested himself, without uttering a word, of all his ornaments and all his jewellery, keeping on only one very basic garment; and he left his rich castle in this wise. Damayanti, dressed in one single garment, walked after him, and so they passed the night together in the open air; for Pushkara had it cried in every street that he who admitted King Nala would be condemned to death. So no one, from fear of death, dared to lend aid to the unfortunate couple; and so they lived three more days and nights out in the open, without partaking of any other food than the berries they hunted for. Nala being sorely plagued by hunger, he shouted out with delight when he

saw a pair of birds sitting in front of him. “They are meant for my food”, he thought. He quickly took off his sole garment and threw it at the birds like a net, to catch them in this fashion;but they rose up into the air and took the garment away with them, calling to the distressed and now completely exposed Nala: “We are the dice, you crazy fool, and we came to you to take your clothing from you; for it vexed us that you did not depart your Kingdom stark naked.”

So the birds flew away with Nala’s garment, and he, bowed with grief and sorrow, said to his companion in adversity: “You see, my Love, the road parts here; that one leads to the holy forest-hermitages, where the pious hermits dwell, and this one to the land of Vidarbha, where you formerly walked in joy and pleasure, where your noble father sits enthroned, and your loving mother will be worrying about you; here the ways part, the one leading to rest and comfort, the other to hunger and sorrow; consider it carefully, O Fair One!” But Damayanti could not speak for weeping and sobbing, and when she at last found her tongue, she cried: “My heart trembles at the thought of leaving you, unhappy man, dispossessed of all you had! Robbed of your Kingdom, robbed of your gold, without clothes, without sustenance, tormented by thirst. – No, I will share all your suffering with you; you shall not bear hunger, sorrow and pains alone, I shall be your comforter, and as you formerly shared your good fortune and great happiness with me, so do I now share what I have with you; my sole garment will cover the two of us to necessity, and as you showed me the road to my father, so I suggest to you, let us walk it together! My father will help and advise you, and you will be well treated under his roof.” Nala

refused this, saying: “Once, I came into your father’s land as a rich man – should I now go thither as a hapless beggar? I would rather wander alone, seen only by the moon and the sun, refreshing myself in the dew and feeding myself on the forest fruits and the pure spring water, than sit at a richly covered table in shining apartments, laden with distress and disgrace, there where I was wont to appear in brilliant glory.” At these words of her husband, Damayanti, silently and in tears, wrapped a part of her garment around Nala, and so they wandered, enveloped in one garment, weary and weak, hungry and thirsty, until they came to a hut in the forest, inside which they sank into the arms of slumber on the hard ground. Yet Nala’s sorrow-burdened heart could not be at rest for long, and awakening, he mused on how his delicate wife would not be able to bear the toils and privations in the long run, and reflected that she just might, if separated from him, be able to reach her family in the end; for no ungentle hand could do injury to her, the glorious one, the pure one, on her way; the gods would protect her from wild animals, and so it would be better to leave her than to draw her down with him into perdition. Thus thought Nala, whose heart was still blinded by Kali. And when he considered that she had a robe while he had none, he decided to cut off half of her garment, making use of a sharp sword he found in the vicinity of the hut, to clothe himself with. After completing this action, he hurried, out of his senses with sorrow, away from his sleeping, only half-covered wife; and whenever his loving heart drew him back to her, making reproaches at his unkind behaviour, the Dark Spirit inside him drove Nala ever onwards, beguiled and with his wits disordered, ever further and further away from her.

But who could possibly describe Damayanti's shock when she woke to find herself abandoned? At first, she believed that Nala had hidden himself for a joke; she called to him with the tenderest names and implored him not to make her anxious too long, and to bring his joke to an end. "Oh!" she cried, "oh, my King! Where are you hiding! – Come! – I can see you! – Come out – come – come! – Oh come! I am afraid in the dismal forest, alone, without your protection in this terrifying wilderness; Nala! Come! I am dying from fear and dismay! Oh, think of your promise to never leave me! Be moved to pity, my beloved husband! and show yourself to your disconsolate wife!" – Burning with fear, she searched in every shrub, every bush, and when she had finally convinced herself that she really had been forsaken, she complained no longer about herself and her disconsolate situation, but only about the hostile power that seemingly wished to bring her noble, formerly so irreproachable, husband to utter ruin; for that the faithful man, the pious man, who was wholly devoted to her, should abandon her on his own initiative, was something she could not imagine. She had almost no more sense of her own terrible, helpless condition, but thought only of Nala's sorrowful state, separated from *her* who could comfort him; exposed to hunger and misery, only half clad, she was not angry with him, he who had robbed her of her garment, she was not angry with him at his breaking his word, which he had given her even in the presence of the Divinities, never to leave her; but she only lamented: what sorrow and grief it must cause him to act in this way, contrary to his usual noble nature. Her trust in him was unshakeable.

So did Damayanti roam through the forest, which became ever

denser, and denser. Swarms of crickets chirped all through it, colourful birds filled it, lions and panthers, deer, tigers, aurochs and bears roared and belled all through it, great snakes dwelt there and sundry other fearsome creatures – yet nothing now frightened she who would normally have been anxious and fearful – for had she not experienced the worst of all? So did she wander ever further, dulled to her own suffering, mindful only of the suffering of her husband, often lamenting it with tears and sighs, starving, thirsting, and weary, until she came to a colossal mountain, which almost barred her way. “I shall ask it,” she said, “about my husband! – You, who rise up into the clouds, whose head is adorned with leaves and flowers, whose bowels hold precious metals, from whom roaring waters pour down, who offer protection and residence to thousands of beings, who serve as an abode for dwarves, giants and dragons, who contain magical powers, you invincible, insurmountable King of Mountains, I, the King’s daughter, ask you, have you not seen my husband? I implore you, give tidings of him, I ask you only for a sign!” But the mountain gave her no sign, and so the disconsolate Princess walked onwards and onwards, until after eight days she reached a wonderful grove of the most magnificent oak, palm, and laurel trees, which was enclosed by a high flowering hedge. Butterflies and rose-chafers sucked sweet dew from the loveliest of flowers and plants; colourful parrots and marvellously singing birds swayed on the branches of the trees, which bore the most magnificent fruit; antelopes and gazelles walked by cool, rushing springs, and here and there Damayanti saw the pious hermits, the holy ascetics wandering, the inhabitants of this paradise. Gazing at all this, she felt so happy at heart, and with a humble gesture she



said: "Greetings and health to you!" Whereupon the hermits greeted her with deference, bidding her sit down and rest and refresh herself. – After Damayanti had done as they had bid, she continued: "You have renounced

everything that has the name of worldly splendour, have devoted yourselves entirely to the service of virtue, and it brings you health, as I see, as well as peace and happiness to all the creatures around you.”

Whereupon one of the hermits: “Yes, health is given to all here, so may it fall to your lot also! – But who are you, smiling light of joy? are you the goddess of those forests, or of the springs and streams which moisten them? Tell us, that we may hold a ceremony in your honour!” But Damayanti said to the Men of Holy Life: “I am not a divinity of the forests, nor of the mountains or the river, O pious Brahmins, I am but a mortal – ” and now Damayanti told her story to the pious hermits and concluded it by imploring them to tell her if they had seen her husband, if he had not perhaps entered their peaceful grove, and if they had any trace of him at all; otherwise she, Vidarbha’s daughter, could bear her life no longer. And the pious men replied to the lamenting Princess: “O you fortunate one, you favourite of the gods! The gift has been granted to us to see further than other mortals; your future is as glorious and shining as your countenance, you will see Nala again, if you do not weary in fidelity and patience. You will see him ruling over his kingdom again, a terror to his enemies and the joy and delight of his friends!” Having said this, the hermits suddenly vanished without a sound, the animals vanished, the trees and flowers vanished, the whole blossoming Ascetics’ Grove vanished before Damayanti’s eyes, and she believed herself to have awoken from a beautiful, wondrous dream; and pensive, but with her heart fortified and refreshed, she continued on her way, and – oh! – asked many a tree and many a bush, many a stream and many a quietly flowing river if they had not seen her husband, and she

wept many more tears.

Damayanti, having wandered over mountains and cliffs, through valleys, and past springs, ponds, and streams, at last saw the forest grow thinner, and in the open spaces of the forest preserve she caught sight of a caravan, which was moving with heavily laden elephants, horses, and camels along the side of a pleasant river edged with rushes. She soon reached the train and was regarded by the men with amazement; many were startled and afraid at the appearance of this woman, tall and lovely, but wandering in wretched raiment and pale with grief, and held her to be a divinity of the forest. And seeking out the leader, Damayanti asked him also about Nala; but he averred that he had seen no mortal being in this forest other than her, although he had seen great numbers of panthers, buffaloes, lions, and tigers. But when she learned, on asking, that the caravan was heading for the city of Chedi, where King Subashu sat on the throne, the searcher after truth, whose mother was the pearl of womankind, then she joined the train, delighted at this news. The caravan passed without pause over mountain and valley, like a travelling snake, until it halted in a forest-gully to pitch camp for the night's rest. A lake that gave out cooling air and the scents of lotus-flowers, water-lilies, and nenuphar, lay between gentle bays, which, being rich in fodder and firewood, formed a splendid resting-place for the caravan. The animals were at once disburdened of their loads and stretched their weary limbs, and their drivers did likewise. Then suddenly, around midnight, when man and beast lay in deep slumber, a herd of wild elephants ran down from the mountain, to quench their thirst in the lake. When they scented their tame brothers, the caravan elephants,

they rushed at them in fury, annihilating everything that came in their way, and whoever did not lie trampled underfoot on the ground fled in disorder with appalling screams of fear; everyone, masters and servants, children and women, thinking only about saving themselves, and thereby blocking their way to safety. Some sought to clamber up trees, others rashly plunged into ravines, where they were dashed to pieces; yet others drowned in the lake; but many of those fleeing were smashed by the trunks of the raging elephants, stamped into the ground, or run through with their tusks. Indeed, in one hour the great and wealthy caravan was utterly ruined. Now when Damayanti, placed out of reach of danger by divine protection, awoke and saw the destruction around her, shuddering at the horrible sight, the like of which she had never experienced, she heard some of the remnants of the company of merchants talking among themselves: “For what guilt must we pay and suffer? Have impious souls not served the God of Goods with sufficient zeal? or has a sinning troop met the God of Trade with mockery and scorn? or do the planets stand in hostile conjunction?” – But others said: “That woman who came to us yesterday, with her wits half disordered and poorly clad with fluttering garb, has brought this disaster upon us; surely she is an ogress or one of the elves; when we see her, we shall put to death by stoning the impure woman who bewitched us.”

When Damayanti heard these words, she ran away into the forest, trembling with shame and fear, and lamented, bewailing her fate with burning tears: “O wrathful destiny, what have I done to deserve this? since my earliest childhood, I have not, to my knowledge, thought, said, or done any evil! for what guilt must I pay so heavy a price that disaster should light

upon even those who approach me! Could I have sinned so grievously in an earlier existence? O, you Immortals! Separated from my husband, torn from my children, driven from the kingdom, put at a distance from my relatives, succourless and helpless in the wild wood, full of snakes and monsters – will none of you save me? Yet nothing happens that is not divinely ordained; have I not been spared in the midst of the heaps of trampled humans? have I not roamed around the tiger-infested forest without one of the wild beasts attacking me? But by spurning the gods for Nala, I must have aroused their wrath, and I shall have to pay for this during my earthly existence.”

Consoling herself in this wise, Damayanti timidly followed the remains of the caravan, at some distance, the next morning; and she reached the city of Chedi exhausted, covered with dust, and emaciated. As she walked through its streets in the garment that only barely served to cover her nakedness, the crowd followed her with astonished eyes, and took her to be a madwoman, by reason of her accoutrement; the children ran hooting after her, and accompanied by such a pack, she arrived in the vicinity of the palace. The Queen Mother, standing on the palace battlements, perceived the unfortunate object of scorn and had Damayanti brought before her, for her appearance made an overwhelming impression on the heart of this lady.

Now when Damayanti appeared before the Queen Mother, the latter spoke with gentle words: “Who are you, who shine as brightly as the silver moon in the midst of nightly clouds? Your figure, naked of ornament though it be, is enveloped in a godly brilliance!” Whereupon Damayanti courteously

replied: “Noble Sovereign, know that I am a poor mortal, a worker who would like to enter respectable service.” And now Damayanti again told of her bitter, painful fate, but wisely concealing her rank and name. The Queen, having listened to her with heartfelt emotion, spoke thus to Damayanti: “O you good and pure soul, stay with me! My servants shall go forth to seek your husband, and it is also possible that his roving feet will lead him here to us.” Hearing these kind words from the Queen Mother, Damayanti said: “I willingly entrust myself to you, noble lady, mother of heroes; but allow me one request: Spare me menial tasks, and let me stay far from all men except the erudite Brahmins; if you grant me this, I shall happily stay here; serving only you, and taking pleasure only in the counsel of wise Brahmins.” The Queen Mother gladly granted the beautiful supplicant everything that she desired, and called for her daughter Sunanda, to whom she led Damayanti with the instruction to be advised by this clever, skilful woman, and to hold her in honour and love her. Delighted, the King’s daughter brought the homeless one into the circle of her play-maidens, and so Damayanti lived now in quiet seclusion, thinking with sorrow of her husband, absorbed in her grief and her duty.

Nala, when he had fled from his wife, also went fleeing, as it were, from himself, through wastes and wildernesses. Whenever he felt the burning heat of the sun, he said to it: “Do you look at me so piercingly because I sinned against my wife?” Whenever his gaze fell on the garment cut off from Damayanti’s garment, he sighed, and yet he could not part with it. Then he came to a spring where he wished to quench his thirst, and recoiled from his own image, which he espied in the mirror of the pure water,

and bitterly cried out: "Oh, that someone might liberate me from this form, so that no one would know me and I would not know myself!" Exclaiming thus, he dashed away, until he came to a place in the forest where a wide stretch of trees, grasses and herbs were aflame in a blazing forest fire. A voice rang out from amidst the brightness of the flames: "Hurry here, O Nala! Hurry, oh hurry! Save me!" In amazement, Nala asked: "Who are you? Where do you call from, and what is your wish?" Hereupon the voice: "I am calling out of the fire, O strong hero! do you have the courage to make your way through the flames to me?" To which Nala replied: "I fear nothing more in this world save myself alone, since I broke my vow and forsook my wife." And boldly confronting the danger, he pressed forward through the intense heat into the sea of flames which blazed up all around out of the fissures of the earth and, high above his head in the tree-tops, closed together in an ardent and fiery embrace. Under his step small flames shot up like young stalks sprouting, and fiery branches stretched out their arms to him, the intrepid hero. So did he come, protected by the god-given gift of commanding flames of fire, into the midst of the conflagration, where he descried a great snake coiled up on a stone, from whose jaws there blazed forth a fiery flame in place of a tongue. It now raised its crowned head and began: "I am the Snake-King Karkotaka. I was brought to this condition by the curse of the hermit Narada, whom I had deceived. For Narada, the mighty ascetic, spoke thus: 'Stay immovably in blazing flames until that day when Nala approaches to release you!' While I tell you of this at greater length, O Nala, stand still in those flames that beat together over you, for so will the tempestuous struggles within your breast be calmed, and Kali, who

lives in you, will be tormented, and you shall one day be reunited, purified and clean, with *her* whom you sorrowfully abandoned to sorrow!" With imperturbable courage Nala stood and listened, while Karkotaka the King continued: "The hermit Narada had invited, to take up residence in his beautiful garden which he himself had created and laid out, every kind of harmless animal, but those other harm-bringing creatures were excluded; and so he admitted of my kind only those harmless ones who wriggle along the ground licking dew from flowers, or tasting of berries. One of these snakes, nimble, small, and curious, was slithering at its ease along some tree-branches one day, when he happened to see a small bird's nest, but the bird had flown out; the little snake, however, craned its neck to peer inside the roost, and he perceived in the nest a small blue egg. In the opinion that it was a drop of dew, which he would like to lick, he broke the egg into pieces. Meanwhile the bird returned, which seeing the broken egg, raised a deafening wail that reached the hermit's ears. My little snake would have been doomed had he not made use of his swiftness and placed himself under my protection. But the pious man sternly demanded him of me, as he intended to hang him upside-down in his garden to alarm all voracious snakes. This, however, distressed me greatly, for the little snake was dear to me, having always served me as a messenger, as deft as he was clever; I therefore told him, as he looked at me, trembling: "Slip out of your skin!" And that happened straightaway; he appeared in a new garment, while I had the old one hung over the hermit's fence. The hermit, pleased with the quick execution of the punishment, had not the least suspicion; but the bird wished to exact its own particular revenge for the loss of its egg by

pecking out the snake's eyes, and perceiving the empty insides, it at once reported my deception to the pious man; who hurriedly sought me out. I was lying sleeping on a stone just at that time; and fate so willed it that none of my guard-snakes, adders, vipers, or dragons, was keeping watch over me, and when I awoke at his call, I was so gripped and transfixed by the power of his eyes that I was unable to move from the spot. He said: 'You shall pay for your wicked subterfuge: you shall lie chained to this here stone, losing one skin after another, but feel burning pain flare through your new skin again and again, and your agony shall end only when one comes who, fleeing from himself, wishes for himself a different form; and if he possesses the courage to press through the flames to you, and listens to your tale calmly in the midst of the flames, then you will be suddenly freed from your torment, as he from his, after many years; but know that you can call for your saviour, day and night, know that his name is King Nala!' – No sooner had Narada left than the fire burst crackling out of all the fissures in the earth, and in a few minutes I was surrounded by the flames. Thus have I passed twice seven years, every calling once in the hour: King Nala, come with your pain to mine! as you heard me, O Nala, when, wishing to flee yourself, you came to me. I constantly had news of you from my messenger snakes, who brought the tidings then perished in the flames. Blessed be you, O Hero; come, now fear not and carry me out of the flames!" With these words, Karkotaka the Snake-King made himself as small as a ring, and Nala did as he was bidden, and carried out Karkotaka, curled up into a small ring, on his finger. The fire disappeared behind his feet. Thus did Nala come with him to the spring he had at first fled from, startled by his own

form, where the Snake-King, refreshing himself from the heat he had long endured, drank deep draughts, so that swelling up ever stronger and mightier, he regained his immense size and his power. To Nala he said: “Before I gratefully reward you, for it is my will to grant you good fortune, come and count my teeth, to see that none of them popped in the terrible heat of the flames.” Nala immediately agreed and began to count. “One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, eleven – ” Here Karkotaka yelled: “You did not pay *attention!*”<sup>2</sup> Nala felt himself bitten by the tenth tooth, and at the same time he caught sight of a new figure in the mirror-shield on the snake’s breast, where he had seen his true figure only shortly before, that was shockingly ugly. And while he was still frozen with shock at the sight, the Snake-King said further: “What you have wished for has been granted you; instead of your figure that you found hateful, you now walk around in another You, but the gifts the gods conferred on you on your wedding-day remain yours, the arts of driving horses skilfully and preparing flavoursome dishes. So go now and seek residence for yourself with King Rituparna, and give yourself out to be the driver Vahuca who can cover one hundred miles in one day, then the King is certain to hire you, for he would like to possess the art of the reinsman; in return, you can learn from him the art of counting and the art of the dice, which he understands; and once you have achieved this, and found your wife and children, and you wish your former figure back, then look at this shield, remembering me and the present hour. Provided with this protection, you will be feared by all the snakes on earth, and safe against all guile, malice, and treachery.” With

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<sup>2</sup> In the original Sanskrit, the word for “ten” is the same as the second person imperative form of the verb “bite.” Bechstein puns on the word “Acht” which means both “eight” and “attention.”

these words, the Snake-King passed over to Nala that shield from his breast in which Nala had espied his transformed figure, and he became invisible to Nala's eyes, seeming to fade into the forest.

Nala wandered for ten arduous days until he came to the city of Ayodhya. King Rituparna, who, passionately loving the art of charioteering, hired all the skilled drivers who came to him, was also ready and willing to take Nala into his service; and he even gave him, because of his great skill, command over all his horses and charioteers. Here Nala met his former servant Varshneya, who did not, however, recognise his master in his current form of a servant.

In the meantime, Prince Bhima made every effort to discover the abode of his beloved daughter Damayanti. To this end, he sent out all the Brahmins to seek her, promising a herd of a thousand cows, and land like to a city in size, to the fortunate one who would find her. Now as the wise Brahmins spread out, searching through the great expanse of Ind, there was one of them, by the name of Sudeva, who after a long and fruitless search was fortunate enough to discover the sought one in a thick veil and mourning weeds, beside Princess Sunanda, like the shadow beside the light, at a royal feast in the city of Chedi; and when he was convinced, in spite of the veil, that it could be none other than the lost Princess, as no other woman or maiden resembled her in loftiness and dignity of bearing and figure; so he watched for an opportunity to approach her. Now when he, in the midst of the crowd of women, revealed himself to be a Brahmin and the friend of her brothers, and asked Damayanti to return to her relatives, there burst a stream of tears from her eyes; she asked after her children

and all her friends and relatives, and could no longer overcome the desire to see them all again. The old Queen was beside herself with astonishment and joy; for Damayanti was her beloved sister's child, and she hurried with her daughter Sunanda to greet her as one being so close to her family; the three women lay in one another's arms, shedding tears of joy, and Damayanti could not find the words of gratitude for the loving reception she had found there. Yet she felt powerfully drawn away towards her home. Blessed by the royal family, she was given leave to depart, and with swift steeds and a secure escort she hurried back to her family. Here she was received with due ceremony, and when she had tasted the bliss of reunion with her children and all her loved ones, and had also made sacrificial offerings in gratitude to the gods, she told her mother in confidence that she would not rest and would find no happiness until her husband, who might even now be roaming around in misery, was found. And her father once again assembled the Brahmins, who now appeared before Damayanti, ready to receive their instructions, and she said to them: "You are to seek Nala, my husband, and everywhere you make your way, and everywhere you make your stay, on every road in city and country, announce and cry out these words:

"Gamester, wherever have you gone,

In sorrow, with half a garment on?

And when someone gives you a reply to this, inquire after him, who he is and where he is from, and whatever you ascertain of him, quickly bring me that news."

After the Brahmins had been sent out, they separated to follow all four regions of the sky, and assiduously searched in cities and villages, in huts and hermitages, speaking to everyone the lines that had been commended them, but always without success, until chance led one of them, named Parnada, to Ayodhya and King Rituparna. He spoke those words before him; yet they had no effect either on the King or on his courtiers, who were assembled around him. But when Paranada, having taken his leave, was walking through the vestibules, an ugly, short-armed man approached him, and when he had heard from Parnada's lips the lines,

“Gamester, wherever have you gone,

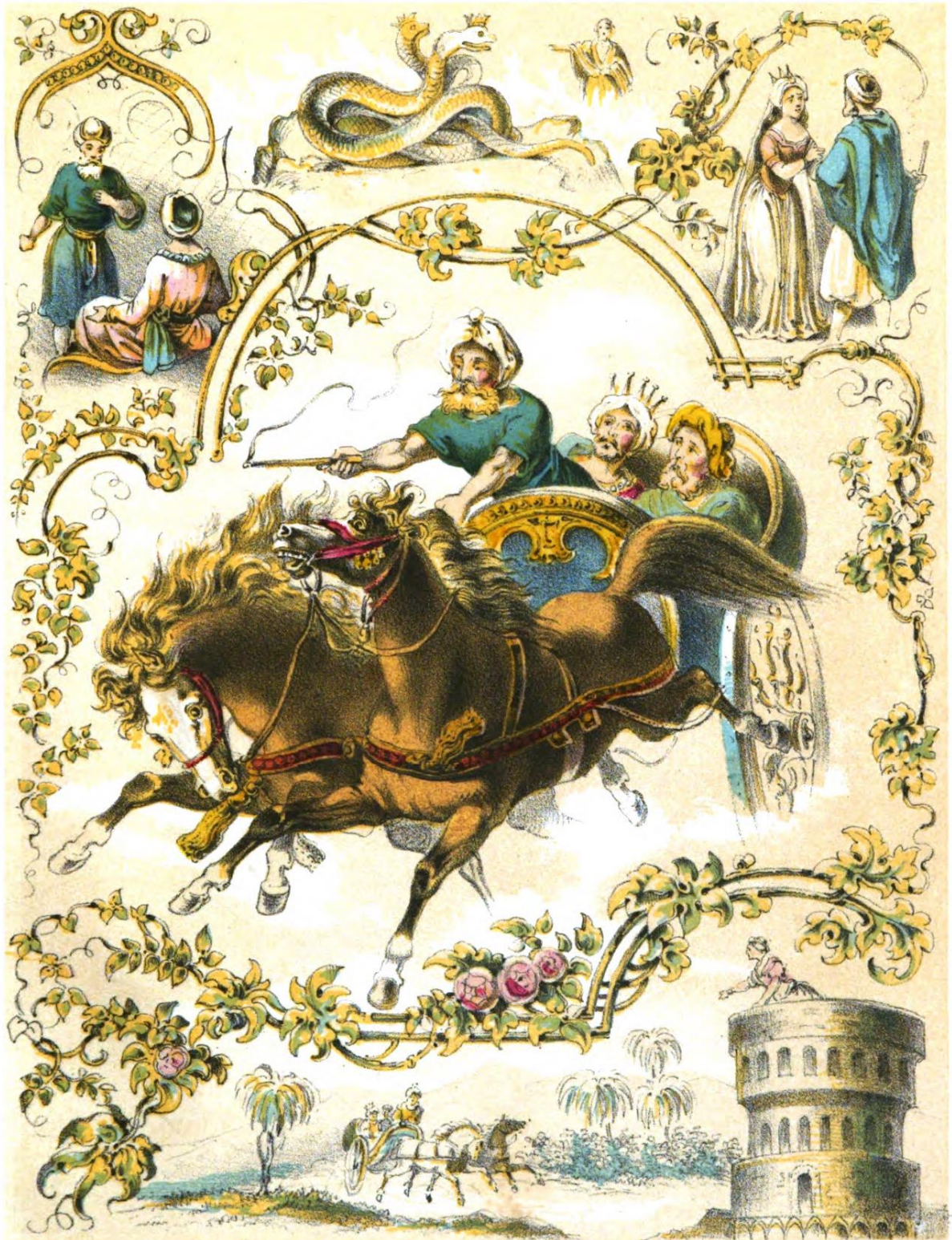
In sorrow, with half a garment on?

he said, in a voice choked with tears, “So noble and high-minded a lady cannot be angry with the man who, himself tormented by hunger in his wretchedness, robbed of his clothes by birds, out of his senses and with blinded understanding, left her alone in the forest; her pure mind, her pious nature will forget all the suffering he caused her when she sees his own sorrow.” When the Brahmin had heard this, he straightaway journeyed back to Damayanti, reporting to her everything he knew; and she, deducing that none other than Nala could speak so, tearfully asked her mother if she would assist her in a subterfuge she would endeavour to carry out to bring the man whom she took to be her husband back close to her; yet all of this must happen secretly. Her mother readily gave her promise, and Sudeva was sent for, the same Brahmin who had brought Damayanti back to her family; he was the friend of her brothers, and a noble and pious man. “To

him alone,” said Damayanti, “the honour is due!” She now first amply rewarded the pious Brahmin Parnada, and then she said to Sudeva, the Pure and Pious One: “Go, O Sudeva, to King Rituparna, and tell the Sovereign of Ayodhya, as if in passing: Damayanti, Bhima’s daughter, is now holding another spousal-choice, as her first husband is lost to her for ever. Kings and Kings’ sons are flocking thither – and when King Rituparna asks when this will take place, then pretend to be amazed at the King’s not knowing, and say: Why, the choice, O King, is no later than tomorrow; if you wish to press your suit, which I am sure that you can easily do, as you possess the charioteer who can cover a hundred miles in a day, then make haste, for the choice will take place at the first light of dawn. Such has Damayanti told me with her own lips.”

On hearing this, Sudeva made haste to execute his task, and he did as he had been bidden. Now when King Rituparna heard his tale, he sprang up from his seat and called for Vahuca. To him he spoke in a pleasant and flattering manner: “I wish to go down to the Vale of Vidarbha, where tomorrow at dawn Damayanti chooses her second husband; you can now show your art which you told us of, reinsman, of covering a hundred miles in one day.” At these words Nala was smitten with pain and grief, and he thought: “Has her heart then turned from me? In any case, I shall go there, to fathom the truth.” And turning to the Sovereign, he said: “Master, I obey, you shall arrive there this very day!” Quickly he sought out four steeds of the kind he required for such a journey: lean, having staying power, strong, pure-bred, swift as the wind, and which he knew to be robust from secret indications; and he hitched them to the chariot, the King at once

mounting it, and Vashneya likewise at Nala's request; as driver of the horses, Nala sat down at the front of the chariot after he had imperiously cried to the horses: "Listen, you steeds, you must be in Vidarbha by the end of this day!" Trembling at their all but impossible task, the horses collapsed to the ground; but Nala pulled them back up with a tug, and by his urging them on in a voice of caress, they flew away with the swiftness of the wind. Rituparna saw this in silent admiration; while Varshneya doubted if there were not some sorcery at play, for apart from Nala, no one understood the art of charioteering to such a degree, but the driver's figure seemed to attest that this could not be he. Then, as they thundered past rivers and mountains, forests and lakes in rapid flight, as swift as a bird – the stream of air carried off King Rituparna's mantle from his shoulders, and he cried to Nala to halt the steeds that Varshneya dismount and pick up his article of clothing for him. But Nala said: "We are already far too far ahead for it to be reached," and Rituparna discovered, to his amazement, that they already had a yojana, that is eight English miles, behind them. Then he said: "Not everything is given to one person; for I too have been granted proficiency in an admirable skill. You see that tree, yonder, in the far distance? How many of its leaves have fallen to the ground – do you know? I shall tell you: it is two hundred and two; of fallen fruit, one hundred and one; but on all the boughs and branches there are five million leaves, and two thousand one hundred less five fruits." Hereupon Nala said, halting the chariot: "What you say is incomprehensible to me; I will convince myself by counting in person. Varshneya may hold the reins the while." Then Rituparna became anxious on account of the loss of time; yet Nala rapidly counted, first, the fruits on



one branch, which he found to be correct. "Let us leave it at that," said the King. But Nala, leaping down from the chariot, counted the fruits on the

entire tree, leaving it up to the King whether he travelled to Vidarbha without him, with Varshneya as charioteer, in the meantime; and then Nala would also have counted all the leaves, but Rituparna, beside himself with impatience, promised to give him anything he might wish if he brought him to Vidarbha by sunset, whereupon Nala set the condition that Rituparna make him acquainted with the art of counting and the art of the dice; he would teach him the art of charioteering in return. The King, in Nala's power, yielded, and Nala was initiated into those sciences by Rituparna. As this gift entered him, Kali, the Evil Spirit, came out of Nala and passed into that tree whose leaves Nala could now count with ease, and he found Rituparna's total to be correct; but the tree withered the moment that Kali moved into it. Relieved, and with a sense of approaching bliss, Nala remounted the chariot, which now flew onwards and reached the city of Vidarbha while the sun was yet in the sky. When Damayanti heard the thundering of Nala's chariot and horses, she suspected with delight the approach of her husband, for no other drove in that way, and she hurried onto the palace battlements; but from there she saw only the King and Varshneya, whom she knew, and an ugly servant – no trace of Nala himself. However, her and Nala's team of horses neighed loudly with joy when it heard the sound. King Rituparna looked around him in some embarrassment, as he could catch no sight of the kings, no sight of the festive magnificence he had expected; yet he quickly regained his composure when he was greeted by King Bhima and the reason for his visit was brought up. "I have come hither to enquire after your health," he said to the King. Bhima doubted, indeed, the truth of these words with a quiet smile, yet he bid the Sovereign who had come

from afar heartily welcome, and invited him to make himself at home in the palace. Damayanti instructed a trusted maid-servant to approach the unknown driver and speak to him the lines that had been given to the Brahmins. This was done, and Vahuca-Nala returning to her the same words he had given the Brahmin Parnada, the confidante now hurried to notify her mistress of his answer. She fetched a deep sigh and said: "It is my husband, but it is not his figure. Go once more, my dear, and observe everything he does, and see to it that, when he prepares dishes for King Rituparna, he is denied fire and water." – But soon the maid, filled with wonder, reported the following to her mistress: "Know, O mistress, that I have seen signs of the superhuman in that man. He walks through every gate without stooping, and if it is too low, it grows to the correct height. A look from him into an empty vessel fills it with water, a second look makes this water seethe, rise and boil, and fall again; with a ray from the sun he kindles straw to a bright flame; and a wilted flower he lifted from the ground grew green again in his hand, O mistress!"

Then Damayanti said with joy: "It's him, there is no doubt! Those are the gifts of the gods which the Rulers of the Elements bestowed on him at my Choice! Go and bring him here to me!" Now when the chariot-driver stood before her, his heart palpitating with emotion, she began to speak thus: "Have you ever, Vahuca, seen a dutiful man who secretly forsook his slumbering wife in the forest after she had followed him into misery, she, to whom he had sworn a vow of fidelity in the very presence of the gods, a vow he so cruelly broke!" Nala said in reply to this: "Your husband losing his kingdom, his faithlessly forsaking you – those were the actions not of King

Nala, but of Kali, the Dark Spirit, who was in him and held sway over him. But how many a pure wife, who chose her husband from amidst gods, who faithfully stayed with him in the greatest misery, and to whom his heart remained true – how may such a one decide to hold a second choice of husband? For your intention to do this is announced all around, indeed, in every land, by your father’s messengers!”

Then Damayanti, trembling, said she was innocent, and told him everything – her sending the Brahmins out, her ruse to bring him back to her – and she called on the air and the heavenly bodies to bear witness that she spoke truth. “Listen – ” the voice of the air murmured into Nala’s ear, “Damayanti has committed no trespass against fidelity, she has never sinned, her heart is pure and immaculate as the radiance of the sun! We elements have constantly been by her since your deserted her; so approach her, as is proper!” And a booming as of divine kettledrums rang out, splendid scents filled the room, and a rain of flowers fell down on the long-separated ones, the severely-tested ones, the reunited ones. Nala and Damayanti stared wide-eyed at these wonders, and now, remembering the Snake-King’s words, Nala looked in the mirror-shield; and he stood there transformed, and descried himself in his true figure once again. Damayanti cried out in joyful surprise, and husband and wife fell with delight into one another’s arms. Nala rapturously embraced his blooming children, whom Damayanti had led into his arms. The palace and its inhabitants were filled with great joy, the royal parents bid their son-in-law heartily welcome, as Damayanti’s brothers did their brother-in-law, and they arranged a feast that was even more splendid than the one for the Spousal-Choice; the

whole city was decorated with garlands and flags, and everyone rejoiced, even King Rituparna, whom Nala, according to his promise, had initiated into the science of charioteering, approached and congratulated him, and remained united in friendship with him after he had, through Nala's art, hurried back to his land, one hundred miles distant, in a single day.

Now when the whirl of joy had continued for a month, Nala set out in a gleaming chariot with a very small retinue, with only sixteen elephants, six hundred warriors, and fifty horses, to win back his kingdom. Appearing before his brother, he said: "I have won great wealth again, and if you wish, we shall play once more; I stake myself, Damayanti, and all else I possess, and you stake yourself and your entire kingdom, everything on one throw! Or if you place more trust in the sword than in the dice, then let the play of combat and duel prevail. It is the custom and an obligation for the victor to grant the loser a return match, and it behoves me to strive to regain my inheritance." Pushkara, certain of his good fortune, immediately consented; and he prepared for the game, laughing and boasting: "Good luck, Nala!" he cried, "Good luck, Damayanti! There is no one I would rather play with than with you! And no winnings can be more welcome to me than those from you!"

"Let us play!" replied Nala, suppressing his anger. "Let us play, instead of speaking!" –

And in the first game Pushkara was vanquished all at once.

Nala had the kingdom he had inherited from his father once again and was the ruler of Nishada as before. To his brother he said: "You are now my slave, and your life is in my hands; yet I will not avenge another's

guilt on you, for it was Kali, not you, who robbed me of my kingdom. So reign in your lands again, which you formerly possessed; everything that was formerly yours I leave to you, and may you live happy and contented for a hundred years; I shall always remain a loving brother to you.”

Pushkara, deeply moved by his brother’s nobility of soul, said to him with folded hands: “Everlasting glory be yours, live happy for years without number!” and he swore eternal friendship to him and wished him and Damayanti happiness and blessings, considering himself fortunate to return to his former circumstances, for he had never been able to find true rest in that glorious position he had wrongfully received; so did they part in peace. The jubilation of the people when the rightful King made his entrance with his Queen was indescribable. Brought to happiness and bringing happiness to others, Nala ruled his kingdom to the benefit of the land into extreme old age, and he never forgot to honour the gods through sacrifice and prayer.