

Nala and Damayanti

Long, long ago the kingdom of Nishadha was ruled by a dashing young king by the name of Nala. In strength and valour he had no equal. He could tame the wildest steed and ride faster than the wind. Though young in age Nala was a learned and just ruler and was loved dearly by his subjects.

There was just one other king who could match Nala in greatness and he was Bhima, the king of Vidarbha. Now king Bhima had three sons and a daughter. His daughter Damayanti was said to be the most beautiful girl in the whole world. Tales of Damayanti's unparalleled beauty and goodness had spread far and wide and it was said that the loveliness of her face was equalled only by the sweetness of her disposition.

Nala too, like the others, had heard of the 'fair Damayanti' and even without seeing her had fallen deeply in love with the Vidarbha princess and in his heart began to cherish a secret desire to marry her.

One day while hunting in the forest Nala came upon a huge swan. He had never before seen such a

magnificent creature. It was yellow in colour and its wings glittered like beaten gold in the sun. In the twinkle of an eye Nala jumped down from his horse and caught hold of the golden swan. "O, noble king, spare my life," cried the swan pitiously. "My mate awaits my return, she will pine for me and die if you kill me. If you spare my life, I shall help to fulfill your dearest wish."



Nala was surprised by the words of the bird and

said, "Don't be afraid, I cannot even think of harming such a gorgeous creature." He let the bird go and asked curiously, "Tell me, how can you help me? Do you know of my heart's desire?"

The swan replied, "I know that you want to marry Damayanti, the daughter of Bhima. I shall go to her

this very day and speak to her of you in such a way that she will fall in love with you."

So saying, the swan spread its golden wings and flew away towards Vidarbha.

There in the royal garden he saw Damayanti playing with her companions. The swan alighted near Damayanti. The princess, delighted at the swan's beauty began chasing the bird. The swan flew a little distance away and the princess ran after him crying, "Stop, Stop, Oh wonderful creature and let me hold you."

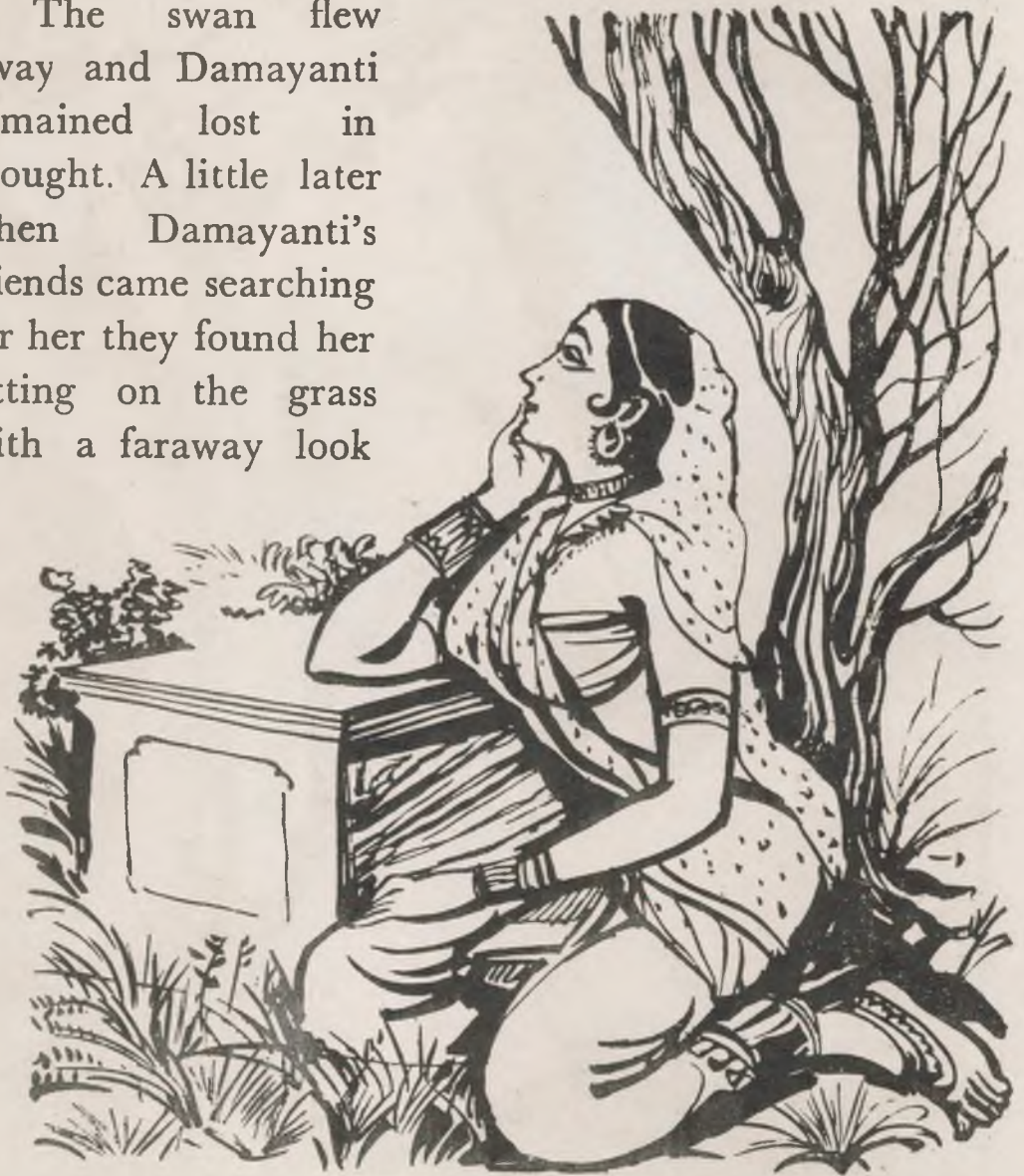
The swan stopped and looked around and when he found that all her companions had been left behind he addressed himself to the princess, "Oh gracious princess," he said, "I am coming from Nala, the king of Nishadha. In handsomeness of face, strength of body and nobility of appearance he has no equal. He is as brave as a lion and yet his heart is as tender as a flower."

Hearing this the princess exclaimed, "Why, O golden swan are you telling me all this?" And the swan answered, "I tell you this, gentle princess, because no other prince is more eminently suitable to be your husband. Marry him, Oh Damayanti. Blessed will be such a union!"



Hearing him Damayanti sighed deeply and said, "Dear swan, go and tell Nala that I have already given my heart to him and no man can ever take his place."

The swan flew away and Damayanti remained lost in thought. A little later when Damayanti's friends came searching for her they found her sitting on the grass with a faraway look



in her eyes and a smile on her lips. "Ah, Damayanti where are you lost?" cried one of her companions and Damayanti got up startled, her face going pink. When her companions began to tease her, Damayanti blushed even more and was quite confused.

From that day Damayanti's companions noted a change in her. It was as if the princess had suddenly grown up. She did not laugh and run about as before. She often sat lost in thoughts for hours. Though her friends thought up new games to cheer the princess, Damayanti looked pale and sad as if her secret love for Nala lay heavy in her heart.

King Bhima too noted the change in his daughter and came to the conclusion that it was time Damayanti got married. So the king arranged for a *swayamvara* so that his daughter could pick the man of her own choice to be her husband. The *swayamvara* was to be attended not only by all the kings and princes of the world but the gods of the heaven as well.

Preparations for the great day began. A magnificent new palace was built to house the royal guests who would arrive before the day set for the wedding. The huge hall was splendidly decorated and hundreds of thrones made of silver and gold inlaid with precious gems were placed in the hall to seat all the royal

guests. Every inch of the floor was decorated with designs made of rice powder and colours. Deer skin and tiger skin were spread out for the kings to keep their feet on. Intricate designs made with flowers hung from the walls and doors. The hall was heavily perfumed with scents of flowers and sandal wood.

Kings and princes began to arrive on the appointed day travelling in utmost splendour, riding on chariots drawn by horses and elephants. Even the gods came down to attend the swayamvara ; amongst them were Indra, the king of heaven; Agni, the fire god; Varuna, the rain god; and Yama, the god of Death, each eager to win the hand of the princess. On their way to Vidarbha they overtook a mortal who could match any of them in looks and valour. This man was no other than the king of Nishadha. They guessed, at once, that if Damayanti saw this man, the chances of their winning her would be quite remote. So they played a trick on him. Nala was surprised when the four celestial beings suddenly appeared before him and asked him to be their messenger. Nala agreed immediately to do as they bid him to. Only later did he realise that he had stepped into a trap.

“We have come here for the sake of Damayanti,” said Indra. “Go and tell Bhima’s daughter that the

guardians of the world are coming to her swayamvara and that she must choose one of the gods to be her husband." Hearing this Nala said with folded hands, "Oh gods, please do not send me on this mission because, I am also going to attend this swayamvara, and we are already deeply in love with each other."

This infuriated the gods and they reminded him that he had already promised to be their messenger and it was most unkinglike to go back on his words.

To this Nala replied, "I am willing to keep my promise but how can I enter Damayanti's chamber? Is it not heavily guarded?"

Hearing this Indra said, "Don't worry about that. You shall be invisible. No one will be able to see you but Damayanti."

So Nala became invisible and went right into the palace where Damayanti sat surrounded by her companions. The knowledge that very soon her heart's wish would be fulfilled had brought back the colour to her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled like stars and her lips were like lotus buds. Her hair fell on her back like cascading clouds and her laughter was like the sound of silver bells. Nala held his breath and stood speechless for she was lovelier than anything he had imagined.

'Compared to her even the moon looks pale,' he thought.



“Who are you? And how did you manage to come in without being checked?” Damayanti’s voice broke on his thoughts. He spoke at last, “I am Nala. At the moment I am invisible to all but you, as I have come to you as the messenger of the gods.”

Hearing his name Damayanti blushed and hung her head shyly. She asked her companions to leave

her alone for a while and when they had left the princess spoke. Her voice was soft and gentle like the rustling of leaves. "Praised be the gods for sending you to me. Seeing you I know now that I was not wrong in my choice."

"Hear me, Oh Princess," said Nala unhappily, "Indra, Varuna, Agni and Yama will be attending your swayamvara. You must choose one of them as your husband. This is the message the gods have asked me to convey to you."

Damayanti replied with a smile that she too had a message for the gods. "Pay them my respects and tell them that I have already chosen Nala for my husband and only for him the swayamvara has been called."

"It's foolishness to choose a mere mortal when the gods themselves are wooing you. Be sensible, oh princess, and choose one of them to be your lord. Marry a god and you shall rule heaven and earth."

Hearing this Damayanti's face went white. "I have already chosen you as my husband. I cannot marry anyone else," she said with a trembling voice and tears trickled down her cheeks. Angry, she looked even more beautiful than before and Nala was filled with remorse. "I have come here as a messenger only and it will be an act of betrayal if I speak for myself

now. The swan has already conveyed to you what I feel for you, I cannot say more now."

Damayanti now understood Nala's dilemma and said, "Go with a clear heart, you have done your duty. I shall choose you as my lord in front of everyone, with the gods as my witness."

The swayamvara began and the participants sat in royal splendour. There was a tinkling sound of anklets and all eyes turned to see the princess enter. She was decked from top to toe. Diamonds dangled from her ears, rubies sparkled on her forehead, emeralds and amethyst twinkled on her fingers and wrists and golden chains glittered on her waist and head. But it seemed that the princess had taken away the glitter from the precious stones; for compared to her radiant beauty, the ornaments looked pale and dull. Damayanti held a garland in her hands and was escorted by her companions. The princess moved from one king to another while every one waited with bated breath. The name and achievements of each participant was announced one by one.

At last Damayanti found herself in front of her beloved, but imagine her amazement when she saw not one but five Nalas standing in a row. She looked at them closely; all five looked identical. One of them was the real Nala but which one? Damayanti was

at her wit's end. She realised, of course, that the gods were trying to trick her into choosing one of them, for four of them were no other than Indra, Agni, Varuna and Yama, each having taken the form of Nala.



‘Only the gods themselves can help me in this predicament,’ thought Damayanti as she folded her hands and began to pray earnestly—“Oh gods,” she said, “when mortals pray for help you never deny them. In this hour of need I cry for your mercy. Help me by revealing the true Nala. I have vowed to give myself to Nala and I shall be untrue to myself if I give myself to someone else by mistake. It was destined by the gods themselves that I have made such a vow, so be true to yourselves, oh gods, and reveal Nala to me by some sign.” The gods were moved by her

prayers and were touched by her loyalty. So when Damayanti opened her eyes she found that she had no difficulty now in recognising Nala, for the four gods showed all the signs of celestial beings. They were not soiled by dust or sweat. The flowers in their garlands were fresh. Their feet did not touch the ground at all and their eyes never blinked. In contrast Nala was revealed as a human being whose eyelids moved, whose body gleamed with sweat. His feet were on the ground and the flowers in his garland had faded. Moreover the gods cast no shadows but the mortal Nala did.

Damayanti thanked the gods in her heart and joyfully put the garland around Nala's neck amidst loud cheering. Soon after the gods took their leave and granted many boons to the bridegroom. "I shall appear before you whenever you call me," blessed Indra. "Just think of me and you shall get water wherever you are," said Varuna. "You shall have control over fire," said Agni. "Any food cooked by you will have a divinely delicious flavour," said Yama, who could not think of anything else to grant.

After much rejoicing and feasting the king of Nishadha returned to his kingdom with his bride.

The gods too turned back towards Heaven. On the way they encountered Kali, the evil

tempered King of Darkness and his companion Dwapara who were on their way to Damayanti's swayamvara. Indra told the late-comers that the swayamvara was already over and that the princess of Vidarbha had already chosen the King of Nishadha as her husband. Hearing this Kali was filled with blind rage. "I shall take revenge," he said, "on the presumptuous Nala. I shall enter him and destroy him completely."

From that day Kali began to shadow the king of Nishadha all the time waiting for the king to make the slightest slip ; for the spirit of evil cannot enter a perfectly clean man. For twelve long years Kali waited.

In the meantime the kingdom of Nishadha flourished under their beloved king. There was peace and prosperity in the kingdom and the queen gave birth to a son named Indrasen and a daughter called Indrasena. They were all very happy till one day Nala entered the temple without the required ceremonial washing of his hands and feet. From that moment Kali took possession of Nala.

Kali knew that Nala's brother Pushkara was jealous of Nala as he himself desired to sit on the throne. So Kali sent Dwapara to speak to Pushkara and make Pushkara challenge Nala to a game of dice. Unknown to Nala, Dwapara himself had taken the form of the principal dice. Thus began the terrible game that lasted

for months. Nala kept losing right from the beginning till he had staked and lost all, his crown, his horses, soldiers and chariots, his jewels and robes. His queen and his subjects begged Nala to stop the desperate gambling but Nala could not stop. The Kali in him egged him on and he played with abandon staking more and more heavily all the time till there was nothing more to stake. Pushkara mocked him saying, "Let us cast the dice once more. You have nothing more to stake but your wife. Come let us stake Damayanti." The ridicule was like a slap on his face and Nala got up feeling humiliated and ashamed. He threw away his jewels and royal robes and clothed in one single garment walked away.

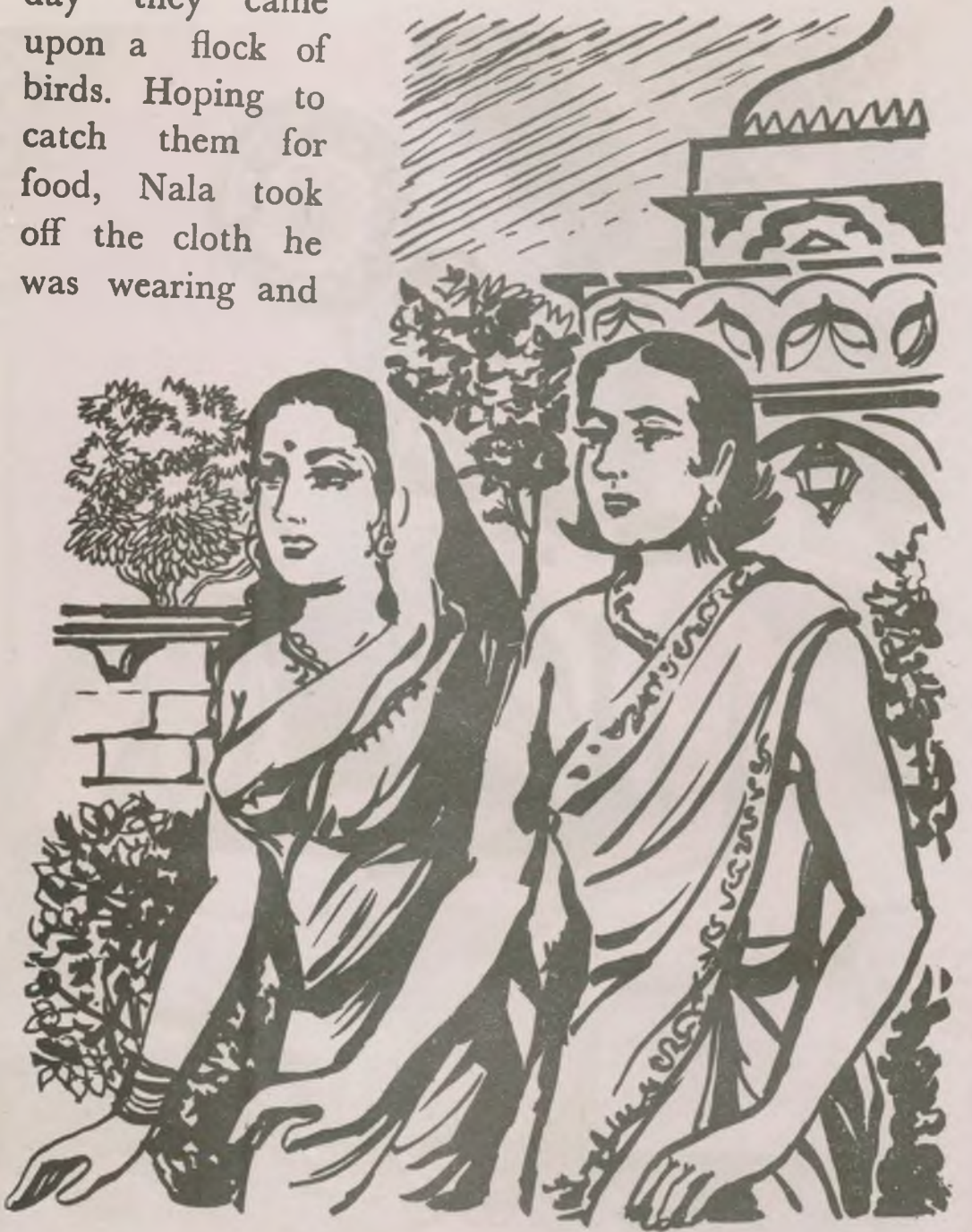
Damayanti had already foreseen this catastrophe. She had sent for her faithful charioteer and had asked him to take the prince and princess away to Vidarbha where they would find shelter with her father. Now Damayanti too followed her husband out of the kingdom carrying nothing but the clothes she wore.

Three days and nights they spent outside the city bounds and then the wicked Pushkara made a proclamation throughout the kingdom that anyone who tried to help Nala would be beheaded.

So, the banished king and queen wandered away into the forest. Tired in body and wretched in mind they moved on in search of food. Then on the fourth



day they came upon a flock of birds. Hoping to catch them for food, Nala took off the cloth he was wearing and



threw it on them but to his horror they flew away with his only garment shouting, "We were the dice in your fateful game. You had lost everything except the cloth you were wearing. We are taking that away too." Now Nala draped a part of Damayanti's garment round himself and both moved on, progressing slowly. Many a time did Nala point towards Vidarbha and begged her to go to the comfort of her father's house. "I think some mysterious foes are fighting against me. I beg you to go away to your father and leave me alone to struggle with my troubles," said Nala.

"How can you even suggest such a thing, my lord?" asked Damayanti indignantly. "How can I leave you alone in such a miserable plight? No, I shall be by your side to give solace to you in your trouble and charm away your grief. Don't the wise doctors say that in sorrow there is no medicine equal to a wife? If I do go to Vidarbha you must accompany me and I assure you that you will be treated in true royal style."

But Nala was not willing to go to his father-in-law's house like a beggar. So, still sharing one garment they moved on till they reached a deserted hut. Tired to the bone, their bodies aching, they sank to the ground and before she knew it Damayanti was fast asleep. But Nala could not rest, his mind was being greatly

troubled by the evil in him in the form of Kali.- "If I leave her now, then, perhaps, she will be sensible and find her way to her father's house. I have already brought enough pain and suffering on her," said Nala to himself and just then his eyes fell on an old sword lying nearby. Nala picked up the sword and cut off the common garment that held them together. Thus, he freed himself and casting a last look at his sleeping wife walked away, for Nala's will was ruled now by Kali.



Damayanti was filled with grief when she woke up and found that her husband had deserted her.

Damayanti roamed far and wide, searching for her husband. She was frantic with fear and sorrow. She

moved about like a disconsolate spirit, encountering fresh terrors at every turn. Suddenly she saw a snake moving silently towards her. Damayanti screamed in fear. Her terrified shriek brought a hunter rushing to her. He killed the snake and saved Damayanti's life but Damayanti found herself in fresh trouble. The hunter was enamoured by Damayanti's beauty and wanted to carry her forcibly away to his own house. Damayanti prayed to the gods to help her and immediately the hunter turned to ashes.

Next Damayanti joined a group of merchants who were going to the Chedi kingdom. On the way, however, misfortune befell them. One of their elephants went beserk and killed many of the fellow merchants. The merchants who were still alive blamed Damayanti for their mishap. "This woman is inauspicious. Let us kill her," said one. Damayanti ran for her life. She stopped only when she found the merchants had been left far behind. After that she met a group of Brahmins on their way to the kingdom of Chedi which was ruled by Subahu. She implored them to take her along with them and soon the group reached Chedi. King Subahu's queen was watching from the palace window. She was charmed by Damayanti's beauty and hence called her in. After hearing her miserable plight she offered Damayanti a job. "You are obviously

of noble birth. From today you shall be a companion to my daughter Sunanda and you shall live like a sister to the princess.”

The queen was even more surprised when a few days later some Brahmins from Vidarbha were passing Chedi and seeing Damayanti, recognised her as their own king's daughter. The queen embraced Damayanti tearfully, for Damayanti was her own niece, as Bhima was her brother-in-law.

Escorted by royal guards, Damayanti was sent back to her father's kingdom where she was reunited with her children. Damayanti could find no peace as she could not find her husband.

Stricken by conscience and maddened with grief, Nala walked on for a few days till he suddenly came upon a great forest fire. Right in the middle of the fire he saw a big snake as if turned to stone. “Help me, Oh! Nala and save my life,” it cried. Nala who was immune to fire as a result of Agni's blessing, brought the snake out of the fire. “I am Karkatak, the king of snakes. I had been turned into a stone and was unable to move as a result of the sage Narada's curse and only you could have saved me.” The snake spoke with deep gratitude and said that he wanted to reward Nala for his good deed. So saying he bit Nala on the forehead and instantly Nala turned into a short, dark and ugly man with

gross features. "Do not misunderstand me, Oh Nala," said Karkatak. "I have bitten you for two reasons.



Firstly, the venom I have put in you will torment the evil spirit residing in you. Secondly, you can use your ugliness as a disguise now. You can move about freely and no one will know your identity." So saying, he gave Nala a garment and told him that he could regain his old form whenever he wanted by just putting on the garment.

That very day Nala went to Ayodhya and took up a job as a charioteer with the king Rituparna and began living there under the name of Vahuka. But Nala could find no peace. He was tormented by his conscience day and night. "She left everything and followed me into the forest and I abandoned and exposed her to the perils of the wilderness. Oh! where are you now, my dear wife." He often spoke aloud in despair and the servants left Vahuka alone taking him for a crazy man.

Back in Vidarbha Damayanti's only aim was to find her husband. Bhima sent men far and wide in the hope of tracing Nala. Those were the days when Brahmins went from town to town telling stories, singing songs and sometimes giving religious instructions. Now Damayanti summoned all the Brahmins and instructed them that after reciting their stories and songs they should recite the following lines :

"Oh you, cruel, heartless man,
Left your wife alone and helpless,
Sleeping in the wilderness,
You were once, a just and dutiful monarch.
Was this Duty ?
Was this Justice ?
What was her fault ?
Perhaps the fault is in her stars.
The unfortunate one has lost all, all, all."

Damayanti asked the Brahmins to go from town to town singing the song. "If any man reacts or gives any reply come and inform me immediately," she told them.



For days the messengers went around singing the song and looking around eagerly after each recitation but no one reacted. At last one of them returned and reported that when he had sung the song in Ayodhya, a crazy, ugly man who is a charioteer of Rituparna had come up to him with tears in his eyes and had said with a trembling voice "Do not judge him harshly, for it is the evil spirit in him that compelled him to

act as he did. For that one thoughtless act he is suffering constantly. His queen was a noble lady, surely, she will forgive her husband for an act on which he had no control."

Damayanti was delighted. Surely, the man could be no other than Nala. But the description of Vahuka's physical features did not fit in with Nala for how can a tall, fair and slim man disguise himself as "short, fat and dark," for that was how the messenger had described Vahuka. Anyway she decided to find out for herself. So she hit upon a plan that would reveal to her whether Vahuka was indeed Nala or not. Without telling anything to her father she sent a messenger to Rituparna saying that, "Damayanti would be holding a second swayamvara the very next day as there was no hope of ever finding Nala again."

Damayanti knew that there was only one man so skilled in the art of charioteering that he could drive a team of horses from Ayodhya to Vidarbha—the distance of about four hundred miles in a single day. If Rituparna did arrive at Vidarbha at the hour appointed for the supposed swayamvara then she would have no doubt that his charioteer was Nala.

Rituparna was quite delighted at the queen's decision to marry again. He had returned dejected after her first swayamvara.

“Perhaps I can make the fair Damayanti my queen this time.” But immediately he was dejected for it was not humanly possible to reach Vidarbha in a day. One would have to race with the wind to make it in time.

Rituparna called for Vahuka. Vahuka’s skill with horses was well known by this time. The king told Vahuka of Damayanti’s second swayamvara and his own decision to attend it.

Nala was shocked beyond words when he heard this. How could Damayanti who had been faithful to him through all his trials and misfortune desert him like this. It was not possible that his wife, the symbol of purity, would marry another while he still lived. It was just not possible. He had to see for himself only then would he believe it. “Do not worry, my lord,” he told Rituparana, “you will be in Vidarbha much before time. Leave it to me.”

Soon the long journey began. The king had never seen anyone drive so fast or control the horses so well. Trees and landscape rushed by, even the birds in the sky were left behind. Rituparna was filled with awe and admiration at Vahuka’s skill; for long ago he had heard that only Nala had such divine control over horses. He wondered again and again who his charioteer really was.

Suddenly Nala spoke, "Your Highness, everyone knows that you are a great mathematician and you know the secret of numbers. Tell me, oh king, how many fruits are there in that tree?" asked Nala pointing towards a tree laden with fruits. Rituparna decided to humour this remarkable charioteer. So he calculated and told Vahuka his answer. But the charioteer wanted to confirm whether the answer was correct or not, so he got down and cut the tree and started counting the fruits.

As Nala counted the fruits, the king grew more and more restless. He doubted whether at this rate he would ever reach Vidarbha. But Nala seemed in no hurry. To Nala's amazement, the king had been able to give the exact number of fruits on the tree. In desperation the king said, "Come now and teach me the art of controlling horses and I shall teach you the secret of numbers. I shall also teach you all the secrets of the dice game. But we must make a move now." Nala was thrilled that at last he had got the opportunity he had been waiting for long. He insisted that the king should teach him the art of the dice game and then in return he would take the king to Vidarbha well in time. As soon as Rituparna imparted his knowledge to Nala, Kali left the body of Nala. Nala felt as if a heavy, depressing burden had been

removed from him. All his weakness and madness left him. He felt joy and power and self-confidence, as if the darkness had gone forever and there was light in him. With renewed energy he took up once more the reins of the chariot.

From her room Damayanti heard the thunderous rattle of the chariot wheels. It was a familiar sound. Only when Nala held the reins did the chariot make such a tremendous rattle. She looked out of her window and saw the ugly charioteer and once more there was doubt in her mind. Could Vahuka really be Nala? She posted a maid to watch Vahuka unobserved. "Report to me exactly what he says and does when he is alone," she told the maid.

The maid returned a little later her eyes wide with wonder. "The charioteer is a remarkable man, your highness. Perhaps he is a God in disguise," exclaimed the maid. She told Damayanti how she had watched Nala while he cooked for Rituparna. "He did not have to strike to obtain fire. The wood kindled itself, he whispered something and a vessel was filled with water. In fact, he did the entire cooking without moving a finger and ah, what a delicious aroma, Oh Queen. He has cooked food fit for the gods."

In the meantime Bhima was surprised by the sudden arrival of Rituparna. He hurried out himself to enquire

what had brought him to Vidarbha in such a hurry. Rituparna was intelligent enough to realise that there had been some mistake; for it was evident that no preparations were afoot for a second swayamvara. Feeling rather silly, he smiled and said that he had just come to pay Bhima a visit as they had not met for a long time. Bhima guessed that Rituparna was hiding the real reason for the visit. But he did not press the point. Instead he bade him welcome in true royal style.

In her own chamber, Damayanti was giving fresh instructions to her maid. She was almost sure now of the true identity of Vahuka. She asked the maid to take the children towards the direction where Vahuka sat, and she herself watched from the window. No sooner had Vahuka seen the children than he rushed to them and took them in his arms sobbing bitterly. Seeing this, Damayanti's own eyes filled with tears and she called for Vahuka. When he came before her, Damayanti began to speak, her voice choked with emotion, "Do you know a man named Nala, who had left his wife alone in the forest for no fault of hers. She had chosen him in favour of the gods themselves and he had vowed before the sacred fire to care for her always. Has he forgotten that vow and the promise of everlasting love?"

Nala explained once more that he was not responsible for his acts as he had been under the influence of Kali at that time. "But tell me," said Nala bitterly, "how could a faithful wife and a true woman decide to choose a second husband ? For that is why Rituparna and I are here."

"Do you see any preparation for a swayamvara ?" replied Damayanti. "It was all a plot to bring you back to me. Even my father does not know of this scheme." He realised that she was speaking the truth and she had remained true. Great was Nala's joy that everything had ended well and he had found his faithful wife again. So he put on the garment the snake king had given him and once more regained his old form.

Seeing Nala as he was, Damayanti could not contain herself any longer. She broke down and wept for joy. The king and queen mother came and gave their blessings and there was much rejoicing.

Now it was Nala's turn to challenge his younger brother for a game of dice. Nala was now a master in the game and Pushkara did not have Dwapara to help him. So, by and by, Nala regained everything he had lost. His subjects joyfully welcomed him back to the kingdom. Nala forgave his brother and gave him a part of his kingdom to rule over.

Nala, Damayanti and their children lived happily ever after.