

## Shakuntala

Once there lived a great and wise sage or rishi by the name of Kanva. His ashram or hermitage was in the heart of a forest on the banks of the river Malini.

One hot summer day Rishi Kanva went to take a dip in the river. The crystal-clear water of the river Malini winked and sparkled in the sunlight. The water looked cool and tempting and the sage was about to get into the river when a strange sight met his eyes. A tiny little baby girl was lying all alone and helpless on the river bank and a flock of vultures were sitting around the child with their wings spread out trying to protect the baby from the glaring sunlight. A few of the birds were fanning her with their wings. The sage bent down to see the little girl. She was so beautiful that her face and body seemed to radiate light. Kanva gently picked up the baby and took her to the ashram. There at the ashram, the sage handed the baby over to his sister Gautami and told her, "I found the child in the forest. She was looked after by Shakunt birds, so let us call the girl Shakuntala. All the ashramites crowded round the sage to have a look at Shakuntala. But Gautami was curious. She wanted to know more about the child.



She told her brother, “You are a great seer and nothing is hidden from you. Tell me whose child she is and why she was abandoned in the forest.”

It was true that Kanva like all great sages could find out about the past or future of anyone by simply shutting his eyes and meditating for a while.

He soon knew everything about the little girl and her parents.

“Its an interesting story,” said Kanva. “It all began a long time ago . . . . . There was a mighty king by

the name of Vishvamitra. He was a great warrior and his foes trembled at the mention of his name. Once it so happened that Vishvamitra went out hunting and lost his way in the jungle. After wandering about for many hours the king found himself at the ashram of the great sage Vasishta. The sage welcomed the king and gave him shelter for the night.

Vasishta also showed the king his favourite possession—an immortal cow called Nandini. Nandini had been a gift from the devtas or gods and the sage was very proud of the heavenly cow. Vishvamitra had already heard a good deal about the miraculous power of Nandini and he told the sage to present him with the cow. But Vasishta refused to part with the cow. The king, who was very proud of his own strength and valour, decided to take Nandini away by force. He felt sorely insulted by the hermit's refusal and attacked the hermitage. But the king found himself quite helpless. The sage destroyed the king's entire army without raising a finger.

The king was filled with awe at the great spiritual power of the sage. From that day he gave up his crown and his kingdom and went into the forest, determined to acquire even greater spiritual powers than Vasishta by meditation. Pleased with the king's meditation, Lord Brahma granted him a boon that Vishvamitra



would be the greatest of all sages. Though Vishvamitra got what he wanted, he did not give up his meditation. The devtas became worried by Vishvamitra's excessive meditation. "He already possesses greater

spiritual powers than all other sages; what does he want now?" the devtas asked each other. At last they went to Indra, the king of heaven and spoke to him about their fears.

Indra then ordered Menaka, the most beautiful



dancer of his court, to go down to earth and charm the sage away from his meditation.

So, the heavenly nymph came down to earth and began singing and dancing by the side of the tank where Vishvamitra sat in deep meditation. Disturbed by the sound of her anklets, the sage opened his eyes and saw Menaka. He was bewitched by her beauty and realised that he would know no peace till he married her. So the sage married the heavenly court dancer and lived happily for many years.

Some years later, a beautiful little girl was born to them but Menaka realised that it was time for her to return to heaven as her duty on earth was over. Vishvamitra, too, was becoming more and more restless everyday. He wanted to resume the meditation which had been interrupted by Menaka. One day he left everything and went back to the forest to resume his meditation.

Menaka could not take the human child with her to heaven, so she left the baby lying in the forest by the side of the river Malini and flew back to her heavenly home."

Sage Kanva completed his story and told Gautami, "Now you know everything about little Shakuntala."

Thus, Vishvamitra's daughter was adopted by Kanva. Like the moon Shakuntala grew more beautiful everyday. All the ashramites adored the sprightly little child and the ashram was filled with the sound of her laughter and chatter. One day Shakuntla found a little baby deer in the forest and she brought it to the ashram and looked after it. From that day the fawn became her special pet and followed Shakuntala about like a shadow. Anasuya and Priyamvada were Shakuntala's best friends and the three girls played, worked and studied together. She helped Gautami in her daily work and it was her special task to water the plants of the ashram; for the ashramites had some special duty to perform everyday.

Years passed and once Kanva decided to go on a pilgrimage. He called Shakuntala and her companions and told them he would be away from the ashram for a fairly long spell. "I am leaving you in charge of the ashram and it will be your duty to look after the guests of the ashram." He told Shakuntala to take good care of any visitor who might come to the ashram in his absence.

A few days after the departure of Rishi Kanva, one morning, Shakuntala and her friends were tending the plants and gathering fruits in the forest as usual. The



animals of the forest moved about freely without fear. The sun shone brightly in the sky and the birds twittered on the branches. The three girls were engrossed in their work, occasionally laughing and chatting with each other. The serenity of the atmosphere was suddenly disturbed by a muffled sound at a distance as Shakuntala's deer came running at full speed and fell at her feet trembling violently. "Oh, what has happened?" cried Shakuntala in concern as she picked up her pet and held the trembling creature, speaking to it soothingly.

Just then a young hermit came up to them and informed them that king Dushyanta was out hunting. "He almost shot the little deer with his arrow. I intervened just in time and told him that the deer is your pet," said the hermit.

The three girls crowded round the frightened animal and stroked it gently.

"I would have killed the king if he had hurt you," Shakuntala told her pet.

Her friends laughed when they heard this. "You can't hurt a fly and you talk of killing kings," they teased.

Suddenly Shakuntala became aware of someone

watching her. She looked up and saw a strikingly handsome man with flashing black eyes looking at her intently.

Shakuntala did not have any beautiful clothes or precious jewellery on. Her clothes were made of a coarse material and her only adornments were flower garlands round her arms, neck and hair. Yet she looked so exquisitely beautiful that the stranger seemed quite unable to remove his gaze from her face. Shakuntala turned pink with embarrassment. Her friends, too, looked up and saw the young man.



Seeing the curious gaze of the girls, the stranger came forward and asked them if they could direct him towards Kanva's ashram as he desired to pay his respects to the great sage.

Hearing this, Priyamvada introduced Shakuntala to him and told him that she was Kanva's adopted daughter and was in charge of the ashram in his absence. They invited him to the ashram and wanted to know who he was but the young man seemed reluctant to reveal his identity. The girls did not press him further and together they walked back to the ashram. Shakuntala feeling shy of the stranger walked on ahead. But every now and then she turned back to look at the young man. She was enamoured by the dignity of his bearing and the nobility of his features. He looked like a strong and powerful man.

Soon the four of them reached the ashram. All the inmates of the ashram came out to greet the visitor. Only then did the three girls realise that the visitor was no other than the great king Dushyanta himself. The inhabitants of the ashram were thrilled to have the king as their guest and requested him to stay on at the ashram for a few days.

In the meantime, Dushyanta's admiration for Shakuntala had turned into love. He was utterly enchanted by Shakuntala's innocent charm and perfect beauty. Her neck was as white and soft as a swan's and her waist was as slim as a lotus-stem. Her dark eyes were like bees sitting on lotus petals and her lips were as red as wild berries. The sound of her laughter was



like the gurgling river that ran by the ashram. Dushyanta wanted to marry Shakuntala and make her his queen. Though Shakuntala herself had given her heart to the noble king, she was reluctant to get married without the blessings of her adopted father. But Dushyanta could not prolong his stay any longer for he had to attend to many important matters of the State. He had already been away from his kingdom too long ; besides no one knew when Kanva was due to return.

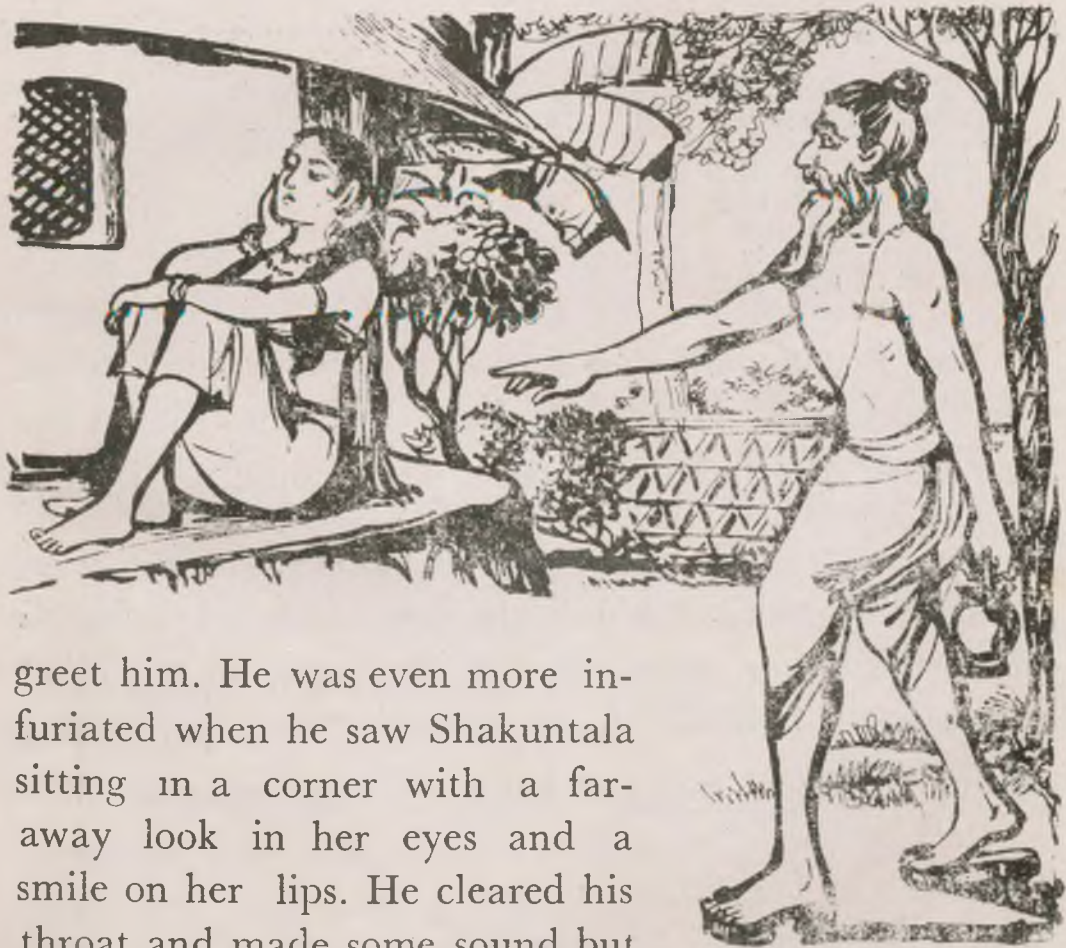
So to the great joy of the ashramites Dushyanta and Shakuntala got married. The king returned to his kingdom after a few days. Before leaving, he gave Shakuntala his precious signet ring and assured her that he would be back soon to take her with him to Hastinapur in true royal style.

After Dushyanta left, a change came over Shakuntala. Before she was as sprightly as a wild doe and as cheerful as the twittering birds but now she became quiet and thoughtful. Though she still laughed and chattered with her friends they felt that her mind was far away. Often she would seek solitude and stay lost in thoughts for hours. Her friends realised that she was pining for her husband. At first they teased her but later left her alone in peace.

A few days passed. Kanva had not yet returned to the ashram. Priyamvada and Anusuya were busy watering the plants and Shakuntala as usual was lost in

thoughts, wondering when Dushyanta would come to take her. Suddenly sage Durvasa paid a visit to the ashram. Now Durvasa was one of the most hot-headed sages and was well known for his terrible temper. Shakuntala did not see the sage make his appearance as she was engrossed in her own thoughts.

The sage walked up to the door of the hut and was surprised and annoyed when no one came out to



greet him. He was even more infuriated when he saw Shakuntala sitting in a corner with a far-away look in her eyes and a smile on her lips. He cleared his throat and made some sound but

it was of no avail, for the girl was lost in her day-dreams and did not notice the sounds. Durvasa was not used to be ignored like this, and although it was not deliberate, the sage was filled with rage. "I cannot tolerate such humiliation," he said angrily. "Because of the king, she has forgotten even her sacred duty towards a guest." So he raised his hand trembling with anger and said in ominous tones, "The man who has made you forget your duty will himself forget you and will not remember you even when he sees you."

After cursing her the sage stamped out of the ashram. But Shakuntala was so engrossed in her thoughts that she did not hear anything and remained blissfully unaware of the curse.

But Priyamvada and Anusuya were returning from their work and stopped aghast when they heard the sage utter the terrible curse. They could not believe their ears.

They went running upto the sage and tried to pacify him. "Oh father, do not give the poor girl such a terrible punishment. It will break her heart," said one. "You are a great seer and you know that she has not deliberately insulted you, please forgive her," said the other. They fell at Durvasa's feet and begged him to forgive Shakuntala's folly. Durvasa relented at last and said,

“I cannot take back my curse but this much I can grant that Dushyanta will remember Shakuntala as soon as he sees the ring he had presented to her.”

Hearing this Priyamvada and Anusuya were highly relieved and decided that it was quite unnecessary to tell Shakuntala about the curse and cause her unnecessary worry, as Shakuntala would never part with Dushyanta's ring.

Days passed but Dushyanta did not come, nor did he send any messenger. Shortly afterwards Kanva returned to the ashram and was very happy to hear of Shakuntala's marriage to the king. “She was born to be a queen,” he said happily and decided to send Shakuntala to the palace.

Though Shakuntala was overjoyed at the thought of her reunion with her husband, her heart felt heavy; for Shakuntala had always been the darling of the ashram, pampered and adored by everyone. Shakuntala in turn was deeply attached to her foster father and friends. She had a soft spot for each plant and animal and particularly her pet which was now a full grown deer.

Finally the day of her departure arrived. Shakuntala bid a tearful farewell to all her childhood companions. She stole away to the forest to bid farewell to the animals and trees of the jungle. She was sure they



understood her. "I am going away forever," she told them, and I shall miss you terribly; but my lord awaits me and I must leave."



Then began the long journey to Hastinapur. Shakuntala was accompanied by Gautami and a few ashramites.

It was a long journey to Hastinapur since they had to go on foot. They often stopped to rest and eat. At

night they usually took shelter at some ashram or with some friendly village people. Thus it took them many days to reach their destination.

On the last day of their journey Shakuntala woke up early in the morning and went to the river to have her bath. Her heart was filled with joy for soon she would be reunited with her beloved. But while she was bathing in the river thinking of her husband a terrible thing happened. The signet ring which Dushyayanta had given her slipped from her finger and fell into the river. A passing fish saw the ring fall and swallowed it up.

Shakuntala was quite unaware of what had happened. She came out of the water with a happy smile on her face and a cheerful tune on her lips. "You are looking quite radiant my child," said Gautami affectionately. "The king is a lucky man to have got you as his wife," she added.

So they began the last part of their journey in a cheerful spirit.

By evening they had reached the gates of the palace. The magnificence of the palace and the exotic plants in the garden took Shakuntala's breath away. She looked with interest at the fine clothes and precious ornaments of the people. Even the guards with their

shining spears looked quite awe-inspiring. The soldiers stopped them at the gate and asked who they were and what business they had with the king.

When the king heard that some people from the ashram desired to meet him he at once called them in and welcomed them warmly.

“I have the greatest regard for sage Kanva,” he told them. “If there is anything I can do for him please tell me, for I shall consider it a privilege to serve him.”

The hermits assured him that Kanva did not require any service from the king. “He sends you his blessings and returns to you what is yours,” they said.

The king looked mystified by this statement and the hermits explained that the sage Kanva had sent back the king’s wife to him. They pointed towards where Shakuntala stood with her head bowed and said that they had undertaken the long journey to Hastinapur only to escort his wedded wife—Shakuntala.

The king looked utterly amazed when he heard the statement. “Wife ?” he exclaimed. “I tell you I have never seen this woman before !”

The ashramites looked equally stunned when they heard the king ; for had they not themselves witnessed the marriage of the king with Shakuntala ?

Shakuntala herself was quite speechless. She could not believe her own ears. Dushyanta was the noblest of all kings and was well known for his kingly virtues. How then could he tell such a monstrous lie ?

The king was equally perplexed. The girl had an innocent and lovely face ; why was she saying such an obvious falsehood ?



At last Shakuntala spoke. Her voice trembled with grief as she beseeched him to remember the day

when he had gone hunting and had begun to chase a deer. It was the deer that had led him to her. She spoke of the happy days he had spent in the forest when he had fallen in love with her. Shakuntala recalled how on Dushyanta's insistence she had married him even though her foster father had not been present at the ashram. "How could you forget everything?" she asked with a sigh.

But there was not a flicker of recognition in Dushyanta's eyes. He looked blankly at Shakuntala and it was clear that he did not believe a word she said.

Tears of humiliation filled her eyes and slowly trickled down her cheeks, but the king remained adamant. "I don't know why you are talking such nonsense," he exclaimed irritably. "Surely I could not forget such a beautiful woman if I had married her?"

"Next you will deny that you have given me this ring," said Shakuntala raising her hand to show Dushyanta the ring. Her heart missed a beat and her face grew pale when she saw that there was no ring on her finger. She looked hopelessly at Gautami and said, "All is lost, I have lost the ring."

Dushyanta remained upset for days. The whole incident puzzled him a good deal. Some vital clue to

the riddle seemed to be missing. The girl was obviously not lying yet the fact remained that he could not remember even seeing her before.

Then one day the king heard a hue and cry as one of the royal guards came into the court dragging a poor fisherman behind him.

“Your highness,” said the guard, “this man is a thief. He was trying to sell your signet ring in the



market. I caught him red-handed. Here is your ring my lord." The guard feeling very proud of himself pulled out the ring with a flourish and presented it to the king.

Dushyanta was dumb struck when he saw the ring. The very sight of the ring cleared up his mind and all at once he could remember everything vividly. It was as if the piece of the puzzle had been suddenly put together.

He remembered how he had been following a deer in the forest and how the deer had led him to Shakuntala. He could recall clearly now the happy days he had spent at Kanva's ashram when he had fallen in love with Shakuntala and married her

Now the king was terribly ashamed when he remembered how badly he had treated his gentle wife, and how unceremoniously he had turned her out.

He sent messengers everywhere but no one could tell him where she was. Shakuntala seemed to have vanished into the air. Some people said that Menaka seeing her daughter in such a helpless situation had carried her away. Kanva too refused to tell Dushyanta any-

thing, except about Durvasa's curse and also that he had forgotten his wife as a result of the curse.

People were sent high and low, to the plains and mountains ; to the remotest corners of the country but it was of no avail. Shakuntala could not be traced.

The king's heart filled with grief and repentance. Even though he knew now that he was not to blame for his behaviour he could not forgive himself.

Then one day the king was wandering in the mountains when suddenly he came upon a little boy strikingly handsome and obviously brave. For the little boy was playing with lion cubs just as any other child would play with kittens. He kept worrying the cubs and insisted on counting their teeth. His companion, an older girl, kept rebuking him but the boy refused to oblige. Then the girl tried to frighten him by saying that the mother of the cubs was sure to attack him. The boy just laughed and said that a mere lioness would not frighten him away. "If you give me something else to play with, I promise to leave the cubs," said the little boy at last. The girl went away in search of a new toy. Dushyanta, who was standing behind a bush observing all this, was terribly impressed by the boy's bravado. He asked the boy his name and was told that he was called Sarvadaman. The name was quite appropriate, thought the king, for the little boy seemed capable of controlling everything.



The king was quite overwhelmed by Sarvadaman's extraordinary courage and felt strange tenderness for him.

"I never thought a hermit's son could be so courageous," said Dushyanta.

"I am not a hermit's son, sir," said the boy scornfully. "My father is a king. His name is Dushyanta."

Dushyanta now realised that Sarvadaman was his own son and he was filled with joy and gratitude. He picked up the child and held him to his heart choked with emotion. He wanted to ask the boy about his mother. Just then he saw Shakuntala approaching them.

Shakuntala stopped in her track when she saw her husband. She stood undecided for a few moments then turned back. Dushyanta fell at her feet and begged to be forgiven.

"I know my behaviour is quite unforgivable but if you hear everything perhaps you will have mercy," said Dushyanta.

He then told Shakuntala that he had intended to send for her soon after he had returned to his kingdom but Durvasa's curse had made him forget her.

Shakuntala was quite amazed when she heard this, for she herself had been kept in the dark.

Dushyanta further told her how he had remembered everything the moment he saw the ring. "Ever since I have been searching for you and have not known a moment of peace," said Dushyanta.

After hearing the king's repentance, Shakuntala's tender heart was filled with pity. She readily forgave him.

Just then they heard a terrible rumbling noise and a voice from heaven spoke to Dushyanta.

"Take your faithful wife and son back with you. Your son is destined to be the greatest ruler of all times ; call him Bharat."

The people of the ashram were overjoyed at the reunion of Shakuntala and Dushyanta. Amidst much rejoicing the king returned to his kingdom with his wife and son.